ENTICEMENT

CLIVE ARDEN

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By

CLIVE ARDEN
Author of
Sinners in Heaven

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Quoth the angel who had never been to earth
To the angel just returned from messages divine:
"What didst thou see?"
And he replied:
"I saw a mountain with its crest in the sky;
I saw a mountain with its feet in clay;
I saw a mountain round which the grey clouds hover——"
"And the name of the mountain?"
"Is Humanity."

FOREWORD

The Fairy Song, quoted in this book, is from *The Immortal Hour,* the dramatic poem by "Fiona Macleod" (William Sharp). My thanks are due to Mrs. William Sharp for permission to quote from this poem; also to the Management of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company for allowing reference to be made to the operatic production of the poem.

All characters in the book are fictitious.

C. A.

PART ONE

ENTICEMENT

CHAPTER I

IN A comfortable room in a comfortable London hotel reposed a comfortable chair. It was characteristic of Leonora Bewlay to prefer the chair's back for a seat, the seat for a foot-stool. Thus perched above tide-level, she appeared marooned in a sea of clothing. The floor, almost invisible, billowed garments of every description, the waves breaking in foam of lace and ribbon against the sides of an empty traveling trunk. Five minutes ago this trunk had been nearly full. Uncomfortably suspicious of the space at her disposal, its owner had paused, with a quick glance round the room. Then she uttered one word, short and comprehensive, and pounced upon a row of boots, trees and shoes, sleeping peacefully beside the wardrobe.

"Boots below hats, not above! I believe that's what's called method," she observed.

The ensuing method resembled that of a terrier at a rabbit hole; after which Leo climbed upon the chair and pushed back her untidy hair. According to the admiring or jealous state of critical minds, was the color of this hair designated. Some gushed "auburn"; others muttered "carrots," with emphasis on the S. "Treacle," wrote Leo on a passport form. The man in the office glanced at the slim figure standing in a stream of sunshine—and the description remained. Save in upward waves and flourishes it

had never grown beyond her neck; and in such a light it shone like an aureole, framing a face full of contradictions. Wistfulness in repose was banished by a humorous, upward tilt of the lips, a lurking smile at the corners of the eyes. A white skin and soft, girlish curves were rendered almost boyish by a splash of impertinent freckles on her nose and a stubborn little chin. The color of her eyes seemed to change with her oft-changing moods. Sometimes they brooded, darkly mysterious as a pond in a wood on a moonless night; a moment later, provoked to quick anger, they flashed with darts of red; next minute they were clear, trustful hazel; again, almost green. Their vivid directness was arresting, often disconcerting. It seemed to probe, search, sum up—not the clothes one wore, but what, sometimes, one disliked having probed or searched. The same boyish directness showed in the easy, free swing of her limbs, the clear ringing laugh that was so infectious—yet it was contradicted again by the tender irresoluteness of her mouth. There were moments, too, when all this variegated shell fell away, leaving a dark-eyed elusive mystery that slipped apart into a strange, ecstatic world around which hung an invisible curtain, gossamer yet impenetrable. It was a rapturous world in which every fiber of her being vibrated, as the quivering lines of heat or the shining wings of a butterfly vibrate to the kiss of the sun. Some people called this fey; others, elfin. Yet few could be more robust, in body or mind, more slangily modern, than Leo.

From the chair-back, she stretched an arm to the dressing-table, where lay a cigarette-case—not a costly affair of gold or silver, but of hand-wrought leather, unostentatious, yet exquisite in detail. Glancing at the figure marooned upon the bed, she held it out.

"Have one, Su? Or doesn't His Reverence allow——?" The look that accompanied her friend's shake of the head,

caused her to draw back with a quick frown. "Rats!" she muttered, impatiently striking a match. She lighted her own cigarette, gazed ferociously at her feet, and smoked in stony, irritating silence.

Susan Murray fixed a look of mingled distress and annoyance on the figure whose attitude was eloquent of a determination not to be thwarted—a mind made up and not to be changed. Susan's plastic nature had found its complement in Leo's independent spirit during their school-days, thus originating a rather strange friendship. A sheltered home, a little local war-work, then—a few months ago—marriage with a clergyman, had molded the elder girl into the correct pattern of round peg to fit the round hole thus provided. Leo, on the contrary, had burst through all molds during the twenty-three years of her life. Orphaned at the age of six, a few scattered relatives had deposited her in schools and divided her holidays among them. Thus no deep fibers of home-life or its traditions had taken root. Instead, a freedom of spirit developed, which merged into the bachelor freedom of action fostered by the war. School was exchanged for two gloriously hectic years in England and France as a motor-driver in one of the women's forces. Peace being signed, the women's forces were demobilized. Leo asserted herself.

"I am of age. I have enough money to live upon. I'm going to have a fling."

For two years the fling had continued more or less mildly, consisting chiefly in rounds of visits or a free life in town among a heterogeneous collection of friends. Now it was taking a new turning—or, rather, working up from this prelude to its great crescendo.

For this particular fling had been cherished as a dream; planned *pièce de résistance;* hidden in her heart—a rare treasure guarded from all inquisitiveness; brought out now

and then to be gazed upon with the shining eyes of anticipation, until at last it had reached the eve of reality resulting in the open trunk, the sea of garments, Mrs. Murray's face of horrified disapproval.

The wicked joy of shocking the conventionally minded often leads to rash confidence. For nearly an hour Leo had regretted having obeyed a mischievous impulse. Silence, she now decided, was the strongest form of argument. Picking up a nail-polisher, she polished her finger-nails with unwonted vigor, while puffing at her cigarette.

Susan half closed her soft brown eyes, sighed with irritating obviousness, and sat upright on the bed.

"Well!" she declared, in a voice of resignation. "No law on earth could prevent you, I suppose. I might as well go."

Leo threw down the polisher. "That's right, Su! Accept the inevitable. But don't go. What good will that do?"

"It's getting late. Sam must have finished his meeting. He will be expecting me——"

"Blessed is the husband that expecteth nothing! And it's not late. We don't go to bed at nine-thirty in London, my good chicken. Oh!—this damned clock has stopped again." She leaned precariously across to the mantel-shelf and grabbed the tiny traveling-clock. "There are two things I hate in a room—a stopped clock and an out-of-date calendar. They are so—so dead." Winding up the clock, she cast a quick look at her friend. "Why do you look so funereal, Susie? Why do you worry about me like this?"

Susan melted a trifle. "Because you may ruin your whole life, Leo," she said heavily. "It's—it's awful to sit by and watch you make an irrevocable mistake."

"Rats!" remarked Leo again, but in a softer tone. "We shall always view things differently."

"I dare say. But surely you realize the danger? The—the terrible risks? Oh, Leo! Before it's too late, can't you, won't you——"

"Susie, you don't understand." She waved her cigarette with a wide free gesture. "You haven't experienced the freedom between men and women who worked together in the war. Val and I used always to spend our time off together. We are *friends*—pals—not——" She sprang down on the top of some clothing, and tapped Susan's cheek. "To meet him in Switzerland for his holiday is no more—in one sense—than meeting you."

Susan caught her hand. "But—Leo—he's married! A man living apart from his wife. Oh! you're both mad! Suppose she hears? Do be sane, before it's too late——"

Leo drew free with a laugh. "Don't be so tragic—this isn't a melodrama! Is my poor Val to be condemned to a monk's existence because that most superfluous woman is a rotter?" Picking up some boots, she began to stuff them into a bag. "Haven't I explained that we are only joining forces out there—paying our own expenses, and all that? If we were eloping you couldn't make more fuss! If we met there by accident and spent the days together, nothing would be said."

"That's entirely different."

"Not at all," Leo announced coolly. "We are *making* the accident; that's the only difference."

Such fine art of reasoning was beyond Susie. After a moment's pause, she brought out another feeble card, hoping it might prove a trump. "Suppose—some day—you want to marry?—another man, I mean. How would you make him understand this?"

Leo, on her knees by the trunk, threw back her head with a shout of laughter. "What the dickens would it have to do with him?"

"Oh, Leo! A man ought to know his wife's past life."

Leo sat back on her heels, screwing up her eyes in amusement. "Su!" she choked, "you really are superb! But you have been born out of due time, like that man—St. Paul, I think. You and Sam should have had a vicarage in the Ark. Unless it holds something that really affects him, a woman's past has nothing to do with her husband. Nor his with her. Besides, for the millionth time I repeat—Val and I understand the word *friendship*. Ours was, is, and always will be, purely platonic. Affectionately platonic," she added, as an afterthought, bending half into the trunk.

Susan watched her silently for a moment. "Can you trust—that?" she asked suddenly. "Can you trust—*him?*"

For a moment Leo's face flushed angrily. She sprang up and stood by the window. "If anybody else had said that, I should have been mad!" she muttered. Then she swung round, surprising Susan by the tenderness in her eyes. "If you knew Val you would have no fear, Susie, old thing. He is——" She gave a little shrug, a little smile, and gazed away into the dusky night. "I can't describe him, nor what he means to me. He seems to represent everything—everything that is beautiful. . . . Oh, to hear him sing! He—he transports me——"

"Yes—but, Leo, he's a man. You always idealize so!"

"I never look upon him as—as an ordinary man. He's just—my friend. And such a friend! We haven't met for two years. I'm simply counting the hours. . . ." A smile half-reminiscent, half-anticipatory, curled her lips. Another sigh of resignation from Susan brought her back to the immediate present, and she turned to the open trunk, with a laugh. "I must get this beastly packing done. Throw me those undies, Su. And—oh, lord!—do perk up. Switch on another light."

Susie picked up a pile of silkiness from the bed—a vari-

colored heap of soft pinks, mauves, yellows and blues, from which stray ribbons peeped roguishly. In spite of herself, her eyes lingered lovingly and somewhat enviously upon the bundle in her arms.

"I have no use for this kind of thing," she observed.

"Why not?"

"Well—they are scarcely suitable for country wear and village washerwomen. Besides, Sam would laugh. He doesn't like 'fancy' things."

"Then make him," replied Leo with asperity, leaning back to take the garments. "Don't give up pretties and become man-ridden, Su! If his mentality is deficient, improve it for him. . . . That's only wifely duty. A man that hath no pretties in his soul, is fit for nothing——"

"Sam's a saint," Susan interrupted vigorously.

"Can't a saint admire a dinky cammy? Can't he love the scr-r-ush of silk—like this——" She crumpled a handful of crêpe-de-chine against her cheek. "Can't he appreciate its luster, the lovely tones and shades? Must he shut his eyes to all that adds to the beauty of the dear old world, and see only drab?—the—the beastly *necessaries?* Oh!" she exclaimed with sudden passion, "God save me from saints!"

With quick and characteristic transition, she turned and threw her arms round Susie's waist, bestowing a look and a kiss that took all sting from her words.

"Now tell me all your parish news! Oh, and how is that dear motor-man I liked so much?"

Susie's shake of the head said plainly, "I give you up."

"You mean Henry Wallis, I suppose?" she asked. "He inquires after you every time we meet."

Leo laughed frankly, rolling up a silk jumper and fitting it into the crown of a hat. "It had never dawned upon him that a girl might understand machinery. He promised to take me over his works when next I stay with you."

"He is a self-made man," observed Susan, "and probably has not met many girls like . . . well—you."

"Therefore I shine from lack of comparison? I like self-made people. They have proved their metal."

"If you lived among them, you might not be quite so keen," Susan remarked, with a sigh. "They are often very —difficult."

"Oh! Why?"

"In many ways. Usually their point of view is the exact opposite to—to the point of view you or I are used to. There is a great gulf, which can never be bridged in this generation."

"I don't see why. People make too much of surface differences."

"Now it's my turn to say 'you don't understand.' The differences are not only surface; they are fundamental. Birth, tradition, education—oh! they mean more than you imagine, Leo."

"I believe you are becoming a snob, Susie, like several parsons' wives I know."

"Not at all. I try and—but it's difficult sometimes—"

"Ah! Listen!" Leo pressed her shoulder suddenly and violently. From below, in the street outside the hotel, rose the sound of a violin. The instrument was poor, but the player's touch was that of a musician. Delicately, yet passionately, the notes quivered up on the still night air. Leo ran to the window, flung it wide, and stood there, a shining-haired figure silhouetted against the electric light. The player, unkempt and ragged, was scarcely visible in the dusk. She threw down some money, and made a sign with her arm. There fell a sudden pause. Then, as if to her alone, a flood of music burst forth, carrying his poor starved soul up in a passion of gratitude not only for money. Rising and falling, tears and laughter throbbed in each note,

pulsated in each chord. The joys, the struggles, the failures, the tragedies, even now stirring the heart of this vast city, in which the player was but an atom, a beggar, were gathered by the summer night breeze—as upon a wireless wave—and transfused into the strings trembling beneath his bow.

To kind-hearted, practical Susie the cry in the music appealed in its material aspect alone. She searched within her hand-bag, and took out a purse; then glanced at Leo. With an odd sensation, almost fear, she realized the intangible gossamer curtain that had fallen around her friend—her strange remoteness in a world to which perhaps only one held the key.

The girl stood motionless beside the window, both hands resting lightly on the sill. Surmounted by its gleaming aureole her face looked unusually piquant, sprite-like. The red lips were parted in a little smile; the eyes—large, dark now almost to blackness—shone through half-closed lids, unseeingly, as if her spirit were far away in the free night air.

Until the music ceased, Susan stood silent, shut out, forgotten. Then, with spasmodic suddenness, Leo turned and, in a transport of joy, whirled round and round across the room. Susie threw her money into the street and watched the violinist's shadowy figure move away. With puzzled eyes, and the same feeling of desolation, of being forgotten, she looked again at Leo, who had flung herself upon the bed, her hands clasped beneath her head, her eyes gazing unblinkingly at the electric light above her.

Why, Susie asked herself—as she had done so often before—why did she feel thus far away during Leo's bursts of wild spirits?—during these ridiculous transports of joy in life, which yet were not joy in the real every-day life as Susie understood the word. What caused them? To-night, merely the plaintive wail of a half-starved street violinist.

Sometimes a few sentences in a book—the rhythm in a poem—a beautiful metaphor. Again, the blue or the amber of a wave just when it curled to break into spray. Once it had been the sunlight on the neck of a peacock. . . . These things were certainly pretty; but why was their effect upon Leo so absurdly disproportionate? Her rapturous response to beauty amounted to a passion. On her mother's side she owned descent from several generations of artists, which might in part account for this. Their blood ran in her veins —the blood of creators coursing now through the arteries of one unable to create. But what caused the elf-like, mysterious transport into a world seemingly apart, unseen, unknown?

"Leo!"—a note of fear sounded in her voice—"Come back! Come back!"

Leo started, turned her head and blinked, then smiled. "Oh, wasn't it beautiful! Wasn't it beautiful!" she cried passionately.

"Merely good play by a street violinist——"

"Oh, no—no, Susie. . . . No! That tone of blue mixed with black in the sky, the stars . . . the night. . . . And that one note—I can hear it now! It—didn't you hear?" She sat up, tossing the hair back from her eyes. "It caught me —here"—pressing her breast—"and I seemed to feel—to touch—all the beauty in the universe. Don't you ever feel that?"

Susan sat down on the edge of the bed. "No. And I think it is queer—uncanny."

"Why? Why?" Leo met her gaze with puzzled eyes in which the strange, mystical light yet glowed. "It is not queer; it's natural. We all come from the—the—Unknown. If there is anything behind—all this world—and you parson people profess there is—then surely we must each possess something that responds to—to what is hidden

in that Unknown? To the—Eternal, I suppose I should say? And now and then we get in touch—connected. . . . A kind of spiritual wireless——"

The whir of the telephone caused Susie to jump up, in some relief. "You are getting beyond me, Leo! Don't stuff your mind with these new-fangled notions. I expect this is Sam." She held the receiver to her ears, and her face beamed. "Yes, it's Sam. He doesn't like me to be out alone in London streets after dark. I mustn't keep him waiting."

Leo rolled off the bed. "Why not? No, no, trot along! Never mind me. I'm not a suitable influence for a clergyman's dutiful wife!"

"Rubbish! Leo—when shall I see you again?"

"Dunno." She turned to her packing, with an indifferent shrug. "Expect I shall be back in about a month. Val is going to South Africa. He gets only a month's holiday between his American tour and that."

Susie gathered together her gloves and bag. "Won't you give me your address in Switzerland?"

Leo shook her head. "I don't know it."

"Don't *know* it?"

"We are going to a 'bee-eautiful place,' he says. Val loves mystery. He is arranging everything, and meeting me at Basle. Letters to this hotel will reach me sometime, somewhere."

Susan broke in with a gasp. "But—oh! I *do* think it is risky! You mean to say you will allow a man to take you—anywhere—without knowing, even the——"

Leo hurled a ball of stockings at her head. "My sweet Su! This really *is not* a provincial melodrama! It's only one of Val's lovable little characteristics. He hates tags—I mean, technical details—names, dates, strict plans, anything—anything *finite*. In the old days he would wave his

hand to the sun and say, 'Let's make for that.' And we did —over hedges, ditches, bogs—anything." She leaned against the window-sill laughing reminiscently. "Once the sea came in the way. So we hired a boat and rowed—and rowed! We got back late for roll-call and there was a breeze in the camp!" Her eyes darkening rapturously, she clasped her hands. "In two days I shall—hear Val sing again! He—he's my chief 'transmitter,' I think—in the wireless I was just telling you about——"

"Sam will be tired of waiting," interrupted Susan, opening the door. "Whatever you say, I still think you are very rash and very—wrong, Leo."

Leo ran across the room, seized her shoulders and thrust her across the threshold. Laughing a little, she kissed her on each cheek. "What is my mote compared to your beam? You are keeping Sam waiting! There's the lift—scoot!"

Allowing no further remonstrance, she hurled Susan almost into the arms of the lift-boy; smiled at him pleasantly, and ran back into her room.

CHAPTER II

WHETHER the assumption that artists above all men need a woman be true or not, they are pretty sure to get one. Their passion for beauty proves, paradoxically, their inspiration and their downfall, causing their own hearts to become their worst deceivers. Richard Valyran did not escape the consequences of his temperament though he might wrestle with its possession, and curse it vehemently, a dozen times a day. The detached freedom of will of the average unemotional man could never be his. Instead, two invisible forces dominated his path, as lions guard the entrance and exit of some lair. While one tossed him to the skies, the other dragged him back, down into the mud. This happened in 1914. Like thousands of other young men he made that year, almost simultaneously, the greatest sacrifice and the greatest mistake that man, perhaps, can make. The long years of a singer's training, the drudgery which even a born genius can not escape, were finished—his foot was firmly planted upon a ladder towering dizzily into misty heights of success. People had marked him for one of the greatest operatic tenors of the age. With a gay characteristic laugh, a careless shrug, he threw all this aside and responded to the first call for men.

The lion that surely hid an angel form, scored a great victory here. But the other did not sleep; he merely crouched, ready for a spring. Partings were imminent. Death lurked round the corner. Valyran was lonely, in an unfamiliar world. He possessed, moreover, exceptional

beauty of face and form, a personality subtly attractive. The glamour of the stage and publicity were allied to the glamour of khaki and war. Before leaving for France, he married the woman whose perfect features had captured his admiration, whose caressing sympathy—that dangerous feminine weapon—had mitigated the early strangeness of army life. A severe wound, followed by months of convalescent idleness, brought disillusion—the dreary realization of a mistake which could not be rectified. . . .

Valyran returned to the front in a spirit of bitter resentment. He was wantonly reckless. He invited death. It seemed the easiest way out of a lifelong tangle. For the rest of his existence he would be shackled—and shackles, to him, were intolerable. He was one of those who must be free—whose every fiber craves for freedom. A slight wound sent him to the rear. Other work kept him there or in England.

And there he met Leo—Leo, with her passion for beauty, her quick response, her freedom of spirit. . . .

After the war he returned to his music and placed his foot once more upon his ladder. A few months of marital misery resulted in a separation. Valyran set forth upon his American and Colonial tours, while his wife betook herself to a villa on the Riviera, to bask in a life of fashion and to batten upon his earnings.

Soulful eyes and a caressing manner should be avoided like the plague. Mrs. Valyran spread her nets and they were seldom empty. The glamour of her husband's name surrounded her, likewise his money. Should her nets bring in an unusually good catch, proving freedom desirable, he could be utilized in other ways. With diplomacy, the bohemianism of an actor's life could easily be turned into account: many familiarities might be adroitly twisted, reshaped. . . . At present he troubled her thoughts very little.

While thus she basked in southern sunshine, the two who understood the word friendship clung together in spirit throughout their separation.

The rarest foundation to a mutually erected citadel is that of perfect understanding. When once this foundation has been experienced, no other soil gives satisfaction. Until it can be regained, other interests, amusements, friendships, are incomplete.

Leo's previous "flings" had been merely sign-posts pointing to this reunion, aimless in themselves, though pleasant enough. As the day drew near, her mind grew more reminiscent. The London streets faded into rows of huts connected by muddy roads. Once more she was back among the camaraderie of the women's armies, working side by side with the men of the regiments to which they were attached. Once more she and Valyran spent their free time in long tramps beside the sea, scrambles over cliffs, picnics in secluded dells. Once more they discussed wildly all the stupendous problems of the universe. Once more, lying on his back in a woodland glade, he sang to her, softly, passionately, in the voice whose beauty seemed to have gathered together the far-off, infinite beauty of the stars, all the perfumed beauty of the flowers, and to have breathed them forth again in song.

Reminiscence merged into anticipation, until they also became one.

"It will be perfect!—simply perfect!" Such were her first thoughts, upon bounding into consciousness on the morning after Susie's visit. Regardless of the other hotel visitors she sang in her bath; sang while she dressed; hummed in the shops she visited, and forgot what she wanted; sang again in the taxi on her way to the station, until the driver turned round; then she giggled weakly.

As the train roared through the Kent hop-fields she was

oblivious of the ranks of sticks with young green clinging round their base. A tiny disturbing thought had thrust up its head: would Val have changed? Judging by his letters, he had not. But sometimes, after a lapse of time, renewed intercourse with people proved horribly disappointing. A portrait in a recent journal showed the same subtle beauty in the face which had no classic claim to beauty. The same inconsequent charm lurked in the smile around his clean-shaven lips, the same mixture of irrepressible gaiety and almost visionary idealism in his eyes, the same moodiness in their depths—all, had she known, the outward signs of that fathomless inner bond which had drawn these two together at their first meeting: a bond which Leo, in all sincerity, had called "affectionately platonic."

At Dover she awoke from her reflections with a fresh throb of delight at sight of the water sparkling in the sunshine. The sea was rough, she was glad, for the pitching boat harmonized with the state of her mind. Clinging to the rail, she watched, with amusement, the anxiety depicted upon many faces. A jolly-looking, freckle-faced young man, standing near, intercepted her glance.

"Topping!" he said.

"Ripping!" she agreed.

Then they laughed together, causing a fat old man with a huge cigar to eye them suspiciously. Two women—one big, the other small—lurched down the deck with their chairs.

"Nobody looks ill just here, Rosy. This is safer," said the big one.

"D'you think it's really safe?" asked the other, eying Leo suspiciously through her pince-nez.

"Are you likely to be ill?" demanded the big one. "I shan't last if I sit by anybody who is ill. I've had to move three times already."

"Take some more Mothersill, Carrie," suggested her friend.

"I've taken it all."

"I shall be ill," said the freckle-faced boy.

Both women, without more words, lurched off again with their chairs, on their hapless quest.

Leo glanced at the boy's perfectly healthy face. "Liar!" she murmured frankly.

"Well, I knew you wouldn't be!" he said, with a look of honest, open admiration.

She pulled off her little brown cap, and turned with him to the rail, sharing his exuberance as the boat plunged, reared, shook back the spray like a steed shaking its mane, then plunged again. The fat old man scowled his disapproval at this scraping of acquaintance between modern youth. . . .

Then Calais, its bustle, its lively greeting from the crowd of porters in their cheery blue pinafores. Leo forgot to bid her new companion farewell. The "bee-eautiful place" was nearer now—on the same continent. . . .

She had not engaged a berth, because she slept quite as well without one. Leo had brought travel to a fine art. By means of bribery she found herself in an empty compartment, where at once she proceeded "to spread." A coat was placed in the opposite corner seat; in one of the others her felt hat, pulled longwise to resemble that of a man, together with a newspaper; in the third a suit-case and a pair of wash-leather gloves. This done, she became immersed in a book, from which she glanced up indifferently if anybody paused in the doorway. Her glance wandered round the "engaged" seats, back to the intruder who, presuming the other occupants to be away ordering their dinner, or seeing about customs, departed in search of a free corner.

After an excellent dinner, she returned to her empty carriage; pulled down the blinds on the corridor side and firmly fastened the door. Then, rolling herself in a rug, she lay down and watched the darkening landscape flash past. Out there, but a few short years ago, men were dying, homes were devastated, terror reigned. Now, save for the roaring train, the tranquil beauty of the June night was only broken by the ripple of the breeze through the poplars, or the call of a night bird. Yet, if there had been sufficient light, she would have seen the ghosts of past woods, dead gray stumps that once had been trees, holding out decayed arms in mute expostulation. Or crumbling, roofless buildings would have looked out from among heaps of rubble, to show where prosperous villages had once echoed to careless laughter. And here and there, those gardens suddenly appeared, amid the corn and poppies, where the little wooden crosses gleamed in their thousands among the flowers.

"And in England," thought Leo drowsily, "there would be comfortable farms where the farmers would grumble about the weather. . . ."

She opened surprised eyes to find daylight flooding the carriage. Basle must be very near now. With a throb of excitement she scrambled to her feet and proceeded to make what toilet she could in a rocking railway car. Slipping on the few garments she had discarded, she shook and brushed her homespun coat and skirt, rolled up her rugs, and sprang down on the platform at Basle. Her burnished hair shone and curled about the brim of her jaunty little felt hat; the tawny eyes sparkled; the warm color glowed in her cheeks, causing customs officials to bestow more than usual interest in the owner of "baggage."

Gabbled to by one porter, gesticulated with by another, she was pushed first into the arms of one official, then whirled into those of the next, until all formalities of pass-

port and custom were completed. Free at last, she dashed into the entrance hall, and there she nearly fell on the chest of a tall figure hurrying to meet her.

"Val!" she cried. And again, "Val! Val!"

Her hands were clasped in his, in a grip that almost hurt; his fine eyes glowed down into hers; but he seemed bereft of speech. When his lips opened, they could only stammer. Leo collected herself first, and her words poured forth incoherently.

"You haven't got fat like singers do. Thank God! Oh! Isn't it glorious?—Meeting again I mean. Oh, Val! Val! Isn't it—isn't it—glorious? . . ."

"Just the same. Just the same." Val was muttering the words to himself, still gripping her hands, devouring her with his shining eyes. "Leo! Leo! Old thing—I should just think it is—*glorious!*"

How long they might have remained like this it is impossible to say, had there been no porter present. He stood smiling upon them in a sympathetic manner for a few moments; then he placed Leo's suit-cause on the ground, shuffled his feet, took off his hat and scratched his head. All this having no effect, he dropped another case with a loud thud, cleared his throat vehemently, and spat.

The pair came back to earth; laughed, loosed each other's hands and turned with difficulty to practical matters.

"We have three hours to wait," Val said with unusual exactitude. "You are coming to my hotel—breakfast—bath."

"Bath? Hotel?" she gasped vaguely. "What—why—what are you doing in a hotel, here?"

"Slept in it, of course—duffer!"

"Why? Where? Where have you come from? I thought——"

"Stop! For heaven's sake stop!" He took off his hat and pushed back his dark hair, with a frown of bewilderment. "I came from—— Where the dickens was I the day before yesterday? And yesterday? I arrived here sometime—in the morning—or the afternoon. No—oh, *sometime!* I know I was in bed here last night, and that's enough. Leo! You're just *you!* And here we are, together again, at last——"

Another loud expectoration from the porter sent Leo into a weak state of giggles.

"We must do something with this porter," she said.

Val eyed the man vacantly for a moment. "Yes," he agreed vaguely; "yes." Then, with sudden inspiration, he stepped forward. "Cloak-room!" he cried, with brisk originality. "Of course! Your things must go in the cloak-room. It's quite simple, really."

Leo stood and watched him, while he arranged this matter. Beyond the unusual thickness of his hair and a slight sallowness resulting from make-up, there was nothing about his clothes or his graceful, well-knit, long limbs, to indicate his profession. Yet about his brow, where the hair clustered boyishly, hovered that indefinable air of spirituality which often clings about the brow of an artist who is born, not made. It may be found, too, in the faces of clergymen sometimes, when their work is their life, not merely a profession; also in those of men or women of intellect, who, deep thinkers, obey the inward vision, not only the outward technicalities of their work. And very often it may be found upon the brows of the old, who have lain aside from the active world without, while waiting for the great change which, perchance, will give them activity once again.

Val returned in a few minutes. He slipped his long fingers in the crook of Leo's arm, with the same old-time air of confidence, glancing down from the corner of his eye,

with the little chuckling laugh that wrinkled up his nose. This was a quite unconscious trick of his, a dangerous trick that held a peculiar fascination. So characteristic and familiar did it seem, that she pressed his hand to her side.

"It's just as if we had never parted!" she cried, as they left the station. "Isn't it wonderful to meet like this! Exactly where we left off!"

"'Where we left off'? I never left off. You were always close, Leo—at my elbow. Whenever anything happened, my first instinct was to tell you. Which I did."

"I know. It was the same with me. I loved your letters. But I had just a wee fear that when we met, there might be—well—a slight difference of some kind."

"There was," he said decidedly.

She glanced up, in quick anxiety, and met his laughing sidelong glance again.

"When we parted," he explained, "you kissed me goodby."

Leo stopped dead, regardless of the traffic in the road they happened to be crossing. "That can soon be rectified," she cried, raising her face.

But he looked for a moment, and a moment only, full into her eyes; then shook his head.

"We are holding up the traffic. Another time."

She wondered vaguely at the unexpected gravity of his face and tone, and at the silence which for a few moments fell upon him. This did not last long, however.

"I hope that bath's all right—nice and hot," he said, with a quaint air of fussiness that amused her. "It's the second I've ordered since sunrise, and I am considered mad."

The order of the mad Englishman had been obeyed; but Val insisted upon visiting the bathroom himself to make sure the water was hot.

"You old fusspot!" Leo laughed, sprinkling his bent head. "You are not going to insist on tubbing me, too, I hope?"

He retaliated with a splash at her nose. "I'll begin upon the freckles—there!" A frantic struggle ensued, during which the door got slammed, and their clothes became decidedly wet. Val pinioned her arms at last, and sat down on the edge of the bath.

"A cigarette is indicated," he observed breathlessly.

"My water will get cold."

"More in the tap." He struck a match, lighted both their cigarettes, and looked again, without laughter, into her eyes.

"The blessed treat of having you to fuss over! If you only knew how sick I am of my beastly self!—of—of——" He broke off, frowning.

Leo looked at him quickly, surprised at the change, the bitterness, in his voice. She threw an arm round his shoulders, giving him a grip possessing more boyish affection than womanly tenderness.

"Fuss away, then, dear old thing. I'm in the same boat."

"You!"

Throwing off her hat and coat, she nodded. "One does get fed up with one's self sometimes. So we'll fuss over each other for a month."

Val blew out a cloud of smoke without replying at once. He looked down at her bent head, as she unfastened her shoes. "And—afterward?" he asked softly. "Won't it be worse still?"

She laughed gaily. "Never mind about the afterward. That always takes care of itself. Just glance at that fly on the ceiling, Val, while I hunt for a suspender. . . . There. Eyes front! All's well. Now I've undressed as far as I —dare. So will you please run away?"

He glanced at her slender white ankles, without offering to move. "I wonder," he mused, "what the afterward *may* bring?"

"A laurel crown for you and a seat in the stalls for me. I haven't heard you, yet, in opera. Some day you are going to sing to me—all to *me,* in a crowded house. You promised."

He looked up with a little smile. "Thank God for you, Leo!" he said with sudden fervor. Something of forlornness in his attitude, and the knowledge of the shackles which chafed so sorely, roused the girl's quick generous sympathy. She laid her hands lightly on his shoulders.

"Now, Val, dear—shall we rectify that—that greeting?"

He caught her round the waist and held her close, ruffling her hair with his free hand.

"Leo! Leo! You are just the same—the—my—elusive sprite. . . . I wonder when you will—if ever you will—"

"What? Your eyes are more Irishy blue than ever, Val. But they look tired. What were you going to say?"

"Oh—nothing. You are just the best pal in the world. That's all." He stood up; but she still held him by the arms. Almost hurriedly, he bent down and kissed her on the lips. Then he opened the door so precipitately that, in the passage outside, he collided with the grand madame from the bureau, who was talking to a maid near the bathroom door.

They both stared at him in astonishment; then glanced at the door through which he had unexpectedly appeared; then they gazed, with considerable meaning, into each other's face. The morals of the "dotty Engleesh" were not, after all, so much above suspicion. . . .

CHAPTER III

LEO and Val both possessed that magic gift for turning ordinary events into adventure, ordinary situations into humor—a gift that keeps the heart young, and is born with one, not acquired. Some people are too superior to life ever really to live. Encasing themselves in stiff corsets they never dare to bend lest the bones should break. Others, again, are evidently born fully developed. They stand unchanged and aloof through all vicissitudes, always in one place, watching the struggles, the failures, the achievements, of the inferior humanity around their feet. Happiness does not bubble up within their hearts as a spring forming streams, down which they and all those around them are gaily whirled: it is a placid dipping into other wells of approved and conventional design. . . .

The remainder of the journey to the "bee-eautiful place" consisted in rapturous reminiscences. Every past incident was raked back from dead ashes into life again. To the tune of "Do you remember?"

The train roared through meadows thick with flowers; wound among hills that rose on the horizon like lumps of tangible blue mist, then came closer, and merged into others yet higher. Around their base myriads of pine trees murmured their ceaseless song and little villages clustered, the overhanging roofs of their chalets rising one above the other with picturesque lack of order. At last Leo uttered a cry.

"Snow!" she gasped. "There they are!"

Val thrust his head out too, and joined in her welcome to the giants of the Oberland. The huge crests and snowy peaks vanished into the clouds, to reappear far above with the effect of a white celestial world from which for once the curtain had been drawn back. This was Leo's first visit to Switzerland. The sublime grandeur of the Alps thus seen for the first time caused her such rapture that she fell silent. Once she turned her head and looked at Val. Their eyes met, then their hands, and each smiled a little. Neither felt shut out, forgotten, as Susie had done two days ago. Here was the blessed peace of understanding. . . .

After a time, Leo lifted her face and sniffed. "Smell the pines," she cried. "Isn't it *lush?* And look at those fluffy little clouds chasing each other round that mountain —ah! the tiny one will reach the top first. Damn! We are going round a corner—I must see if it gets up——"

Val seized her by the shoulders, and pulled her back to the seat at his side. "You will be off in one yourself in a minute," he observed. "When you were a kiddy, did you ever imagine that the souls of people who died went away in the clouds?"

"No. Why? Did you?"

He nodded, laughing. "Same sort of notion as the stork and babies."

"I like the idea," said Leo thoughtfully. "The good souls would go up in white clouds, I suppose? And the bad in the black thundery ones? I wonder what color yours will be? Mine will be rather—rather murky gray."

"Mine will be jazz."

"Whoever saw a jazz cloud?"

"One in a rainbow?" he suggested quickly. "I hope I go up in a lurid trail."

The same, silly, whimsical nonsense as of yore! To Leo nothing seemed changed. She had no idea of the subtle

germination in the man's lonely heart of one stray seed which, two years ago had assumed the texture of the other robust seeds of friendship. No shadow of the dangers lurking round the corner, dogging her every footstep, marred the journey's gay camaraderie.

Early in the evening, when the valley was all golden and the sky all blue, they found themselves in a fiacre, driving along a narrow lane. On their right stretched meadows, the tall uncut grass thick with flowers, gay with a myriad hues—blue, pink, purple, russet, white and green rioting together, their subtle perfume blending with that of the pines, their brilliance enhanced by the somber green of the firs in the wood behind. This wood flanked the base of a mountain, one of a lower range running parallel to the road. A mountain stream splashed and gurgled through the pine wood and the meadows, under a bridge, crossed by the lane, thence through some pasture land into the lake. Yellow cows grazed in those pastures, the melodious tinkle of their many-toned bells not quite drowning the loud chirrup of grasshoppers, and dull blue-gray in the shadow of the distant mountains, scintillating golden down the center, silver on the near side, the lake rippled in the evening breeze, mile upon mile unfolding before the dazzled eyes of the two in the fiacre. Across the water loomed the giants, one towering range merging into another, the snow on their crests glittering in the sun, the lower flanks deep blue and softest gray.

Val had fallen unusually silent; but this did not surprise Leo, owing to her own state of ecstatic rapture having become too chronic for adequate words. After the first mile or so, she broke the silence without hesitation.

"Would you mind very much telling me the name of this lake? Just for the sake of my geography. If you happen to know it yourself, of course!"

He started; then seemed to take a mental grip of something, as a man grips the rail of a ship that is swaying unsteadily. Looking down upon the one woman in all the world, alone at last with him in the midst of this intoxicating beauty, he bit his lip rather fiercely before trusting his voice.

"Thun," he replied briefly, "Lake Thun."

"Thanks." She laughed softly. "I quite thought it was a lake!"

But he had turned away again, and was gazing with extraordinary intensity at the water. She glanced at his profile, knowing well his quick changes of mood; then she surrendered herself once more to the scene unfolding at each turn. . . . Later, the fiacre drew up at an old chalet, whose dark wooden walls were nearly hidden by wistaria and clematis. It was a small hotel or *pension,* managed by a Frenchwoman widowed in the war.

They had only time to change and hurry down to dinner, where, none of the other visitors being English, they found themselves in a peculiarly delightful state of isolation at their little table. Val's silent mood quickly changed to one of reckless vivacity. He concocted outrageous stories about everybody within his line of vision, and met their admiring glances with his infectious, sidelong little smile. Leo kicked his foot each time.

"You look like Mephistopheles without his cloak! Val, how did you hear of such a perfect little place?"

"From my 'Isolde.' She spent her honeymoon here."

"Do they know who you are?"

"No. Who am I? My secretary fixed it all up. He is discretion personified."

"Then—if they don't know you, why does everybody stare—— Oh, Val, stop giving the glad eye to that fat Italian!"

"They think we are honeymooners. I'm only playing up. Why don't you look as if you adored me?" He laid his hand over hers on the table. *"Carissima!"*

"Lunatic!" She drew away, with a giggle at his expression. "You once told me I possessed a hard nut instead of a heart."

"Oh—*ja*—*si*—*'do re mi'*—and is it still uncracked?"

"Still uncracked."

He bent over his plate with a gleam in his eyes. "There will be the deuce to pay—for somebody—some day! Oh, curse! I've swallowed an orange pip. Hope it doesn't grow. . . ." He waved his wine-glass aloft. "Here's to——"

"Our—meeting, Val?"

"The cracking of the nut!"

This time she saw the gleam in the eyes that met her own. They were blue-black to-night as the sky in London when the violinist played. A little of the same joy in beauty stirred her heart and glowed in her face.

After dinner they strolled down a path between pastures to the margin of the lake. The grasshoppers' chorus predominated now over the occasional music of a distant cowbell. Tiny waves broke gently on the shore and lapped among the reeds. Across the water, away to their left, above the dark haze surrounding the lower mountains, towered the snowy crest of Eiger, half swathed in a mantle of filmy gray.

Leo thrust her hand through Val's arm. "It's as if we are being given a glimpse of a different world up there, isn't it? And all the other world we know is shut away."

"The World of the Immortals," he murmured, pressing her arm close. "Oh, Leo!—Look!"

He waved his hand forward, and she uttered an ecstatic gasp. On the far side of the water, a belt of what resembled glass with a fire behind was spreading horizontally

across the mountains. Stretching away to their right, growing deeper, wider, this merged into the mauve and flame of the *Alpenglühen,* which spread over the cone-shaped Niesen, over the Stockhorn range, like a brilliant gossamer cloak, a shining mantle of dawn. Every white peak and curve seemed to have blushed vividly, tenderly, at the whisper of an Immortal lover hidden in the world half-revealed. In the little hollows and nooks shadowed by overhanging ledges, the snow, in its darkened whiteness, gleamed almost purple, merging, lower still, into the green-black of the pine forests. The lake, reflecting mountains and woods, glowed bright rose here, rippled silver and pale green there, stretched dark shadows in grotesque shapes, which merged into orange or red.

Neither Val nor Leo spoke. He, too, possessed that passionate response to beauty, far removed from sentimentality—which, with almost mystical power, lifts the soul into communion with forces unseen, unknown. Then the everyday world of the flesh, of money, competition, commercialism, no longer seems the real world; it lies forgotten. The world of the spirit, so often blocked by the other that seems the real, obtains, for once, undisputed sovereignty.

When the afterglow faded, the two looked at each other, its glory yet in their eyes. Leo sank on a little hummock, and Val flung himself at her feet, his head against her knees.

"I have so much to say to you—so much!"

She passed her fingers through his thick, clustering hair. "And I, too. Oh—Val!

"Through the pine wood will I wander,
Where the mountain brooklet springs,
Where the forest stags are roaming,
Where the little song-thrush sings.

That verse has been ringing in my head. We can do it all together—just you and I. Nobody else would—would quite understand——"

"Nobody!" he cried, throwing an arm across her lap, and clasping her hand. "Nobody! Leo—that's the hell of it all!"

She looked down into his troubled eyes that resembled, at the moment, those of a child who had lost its way.

"My poor Val! Is it as bad as that? Tell me . . . tell me. . . ."

The artistic temperament is blamed for many things; is held responsible for many shortcomings. But those who condemn might pity if, for one short week, they suffered its lifelong loneliness. Keyed to the highest pitch of sensitiveness, it is at the mercy of every bow drawn across its strings. Feet insecurely planted upon earth, head and shoulders in clouds of invisible wonders, hands grasping, now up, now down, such a one can seldom meet its mate.

Val drew the girl's hand round his shoulders, and began to talk, as he had talked to her in days of old—as he had never talked to another. All the myriad Big Things that an artist shrinks from exposing to the world's unsympathetic gaze found a response and an echo in Leo. Here her own restless spirit found peace with its master-spirit. Every now and then he broke into little snatches of music for illustration. Where another man would take paper, pencil, compass or ruler, he illuminated his point by musical sound. Only three or four notes, maybe; yet they gave, as in Wagner's operas, the motif of his meaning. The technicalities he waved away. . . .

Dusk crept over the lake with stealthy, unnoticed tread. Beyond the mountains, a pale disk of moon grew more and more vivid; in the dark canopy above, stars appeared one by one.

Val stretched, glancing round at the black outline of mountains, and spoke as if to himself. "Now the Immortals have closed their world to you and me. 'The Lordly Ones' are dancing in their hills and meadows." Below his breath he sang the words suggested by his thought. "Do you know that, Leo? The song of 'Midir'? The Fairy Song?"

"No. Sing it to me."

"Don't you know the legend?"

"No."

He leaned back against her knees, half turning so as to watch her face. "A Princess of the Hidden People—the Immortals—has strayed away and married the mortal King. She falls under the shadow of 'Dalna,' the Spirit of Forgetfulness. But after a time she is haunted by dreams—echoes of the life she has forsaken. Her real self—her spiritual self—can not find content."

"Yes?" Leo urged, when he paused.

"At last 'Midir' comes—her lover among the Immortals. He sings the song whose echoes haunt her. By reminding her of its wonderful beauty, he causes remembrance to return of the world that is really her home. He tries to win her back——"

His voice died away, but he continued to gaze into her face with a look she did not fathom.

"Yes?" she urged again. "I hope she goes? But—poor King——"

"Oh, yes—she—she goes."

"Sing me the song of 'Midir.'"

He raised himself a little, his fingers twining around hers. And then, softly, pure as morning dewdrops, clear as the water in the moonlight, sublimely simple, yet giving that subtle contact with Infinity heard only in the voice of genius, each exquisitely molded note stole forth—

"How beautiful they are,
The Lordly Ones
Who dwell in the hills,
In the hollow hills.

"They have faces like flowers,
And their breath is a wind
That blows over summer meadows
Filled with dewy clover.

"Their limbs are more white
Than shafts of moonshine:
They are more fleet
Than the March wind.

"They laugh and are glad
And are terrible:
When their lances shake and glitter
Every green reed quivers.

"How beautiful they are,
How beautiful
The Lordly Ones
In the hollow hills."

The fairy lilt of the melody might have been composed of the foam on the Lordly Ones' shores. The song seemed the breathing pulse of this night's moonlit shadows on the mountains and water. Yet each note vibrated with the dramatic tenseness of sincerity. Had Val been singing in a crowded opera house, no more passionate reality, no deeper meaning, would have permeated his voice.

Leo's spirit appeared to have danced away with his over the dewy pastures. She pressed his hand. "Go on," she murmured. "More, Val, more. . . ."

"There is no age there,
Nor any sorrow:
As the stars in Heaven
Are the cattle in the valleys.

"There is no hunger
And no thirst
In the Hollow Land,
The Land of Youth.

"How beautiful they are
The Lordly Ones
Who dwell in the hills,
In the hollow hills."

Again the impassioned throb in the voice she loved sank into silence; but still Leo did not move. Her eyes were half-closed; her spirit was away now among the dim mountains—free in the night's soft scents and sounds, upon which the seal of perfection had been set.

Val opened lips that trembled, but something choked his speech. Lifting his hands to his head, he found they also were trembling; his brow, from which he pushed his tumbled hair, felt hot and damp. Abruptly he stumbled to his feet and took a few unsteady steps down to the water.

The action roused Leo. She stretched her arms, then let them fall to her sides.

"Val, dear! You—you are truly—a gift from the Gods! I have been away with 'Midir' to the 'Land of Youth.' I have seen——" Breaking off with a laugh, she stumbled to her feet; stretched her arms again; then looked at his back with vague curiosity and quick change of mood. "What are you doing? Washing? Or drinking the lake?"

"I g-got hot—singing," he stammered in a muffled voice. He turned round, the drops of water he had splashed into his face trickling round eyes that burned unnaturally bright in the moonlight. "Leo—it's bedtime. It—must be awfully late."

"Yes," she agreed casually, "it must. I'm tired too. That—visit away to 'The Land'—ah! Look all around! The world is silver now, and dark blue——"

"Have you everything you want? A—a comfortable room——"

She laughed. "Fusspot! Are you going to bed, too?"

"Yes, yes. . . . Soon. C-can you find your way?—It's only up this little lane——"

"Of course." She had known Val in a dozen moods within the hour: moods of anger, dreaminess, irresponsible gaiety, depression. Surprised, but not in the least perturbed, she slipped her hand under his arm and pressed it.

"Well—good night, old thing. Don't forget the time and stay here until breakfast."

With a quick, impetuous movement, he pulled her close. "Leo!" he muttered brokenly. She raised her face, prepared to be kissed. Instead, however, he drew quickly free and waved his hand in dismissal. "Good night," he said.

Leo turned away, reflecting with a smile of fond amusement, upon the effect of music. The arm she had pressed had been shaking; the fingers that clutched her own had trembled. "He is just a bundle of taut violin strings," she thought. "One note sets them all a-quiver. Just the same! Nothing is changed." . . .

And the man, left alone, flung himself face downward on the warm scented turf, clutching it with both hands. The two lions prowled and fought across his prostrate form. In his heart raged a three-cornered battle between weakness, temptation, latent strength.

The dividing line that subtly, insidiously creeps into the relations of man and woman is not, sometimes, easily recognized. On one side blossom the green branches, the soft-toned buds of friendship; on the other, the brilliant flowers of love burn blood-red, full-blown roses set in a maze of thorn. Val was lost in the maze. Only by contact with the old affectionate friendship had he consciously realized the distance he had traveled on the other side of the line during

the two years of separation. Leo had remained in exactly the same spot. She gave him the same frank, idealistic, sexless love as before. And he wanted—good lord! what did he not want? What had he scarcely dared to hope? This reunion, for which his whole being had yearned, glorious in one sense—spiritually satisfying—held in its every hour an aching pain; a craving that might become intolerable—irresistible. . . .

Val's emotional nature, trained by his profession to express itself, was not the one to reason, to calculate costs. Another, encased in proved armor, might have passed scatheless through the thorns, a weaker would have fled. Val's defenses were almost nil; but he was not one to turn his back. . . .

A cold mist rising from the lake caused him to realize his shivering limbs. He rose stiffly, and walked up and down beside the water, conscious of one dominant idea. The friendship that was so beautiful, that meant so much to them both, must never be destroyed. There must be no false step. He knew Leo's nature as few others knew it: was well aware of her fastidious shrinking from everything ugly, everything incomprehensible. To her at present, passion was incomprehensible. She had turned from things in the war with horror and loathing—had turned to him, with a faith childishly beautiful, to adjust these things, to bring back the beauty into a world they debased. . . .

When he slowly approached the chalet, he glanced, with bewildered eyes, at a window through which a light yet shone. The shutters were flung wide, and the back of Leo's head was visible. For a moment he hesitated, his lips forming for a whistle. But they closed again. Passing his hand over his damp hair he turned toward the main entrance.

"Can I do it?" he muttered to himself. "Can I carry this through? Is it possible? . . . Is it humanly possible? . . ."

CHAPTER IV

LEO'S state of ecstatic excitement calmed down a little after a night's rest. But she greeted Val with shining eyes and beaming face next morning.

"Painfully British!" she sighed, sitting down for breakfast in a blaze of sunshine. "But I hate crumbs round my toes in bed." A lilac tree bloomed just outside the long windows near their table. She lifted her head and breathed in deep wafts of scented air. "Glad-eye missing this morning, Val! What's up?"

"Nothing. I slept badly. What shall we do to-day?"

"To-day we really begin. Yesterday was only the introduction—the overture, to use words you will understand."

"I have a larger vocabulary——"

"The curtain is up, and the opera now commences. Audience is therefore requested to cough. Do you ever feel nervous at that point, Val?"

"When the audience coughs?"

"Oh, yes, yes—you hopeless idiot!"

Val had come down-stairs with the brisk determination of a man who has himself well in hand, but is fatally conscious of the fact. At the unconscious irony of her question, he laughed.

"I do. Very—sometimes. What shall be the first scene?"

"Let's just ramble all day as we used to do. And let's be utterly senseless, as we used to be. There is a grain of sense in your eye, this morning, which is unfamiliar. Kindly expunge it."

"'As we used to be'!" he echoed, looking across at the radiant, sun-kissed figure in its white frock. "If we could only go back to it all. . . ."

His tone caused her to open wide eyes of surprise. "But we are back! That's just the joy of—this. What *is* the matter? Have you remembered an unpaid bill? You were always forgetting them, and having shocks——"

"That's it," he interrupted bitterly. "The same old unpaid bill. One mistake—and the bill hangs round one's neck for the rest of life in this—this damned world you think so good."

He pushed back his chair, ignoring her cry of protest, and felt in his pockets for his cigarettes. "Let's start, shall we? I want to walk—keep moving. . . . Are you ready?"

Leo finished her coffee, then got up. "I'll see about the lunch——"

"Oh—must we bother?"

She laughed at this well-remembered impatience. "I mean," he added vaguely, "we shall probably drop across food, somewhere."

"We are not the Children of Israel," Leo reminded him.

He strolled about the garden until she rejoined him with a parcel of sandwiches.

"Now look here," she began, after he had stuffed the package into his pocket, "we must—I want, like the parsons, to say a few words."

He looked quickly down, with his vivid smile.

"Fire away then! What's the text?"

"The text is—is—oh—'Freedom.'"

He glanced at her again. But she was looking at the lake, and missed the unusual expression that flitted across his face.

With Leo, the realization of a wrong was merely the preliminary to righting it. The inertia which causes so

many people to sit still under fortune's knocks, and turn the other cheek, filled her with impatience. Two years ago, this "bill" had been merely irksome to Val. Now, she perceived it to have become intolerable.

As they entered the pine wood near the hotel, she thrust her arm through his. "Old boy—why do you stick it?" she asked impulsively. "Can't you rid—can't you get free?"

He kicked a fir-cone away with an impatient foot. "No; or do you think I'd hesitate? She doesn't want freedom. This—pays her better. And she has adopted the lonely woman pose—misunderstood, tied to an actor—rotter. You know the stunt? It's very telling."

Leo gave a gurgle of rage. "It is so very unfair!"

He laughed mirthlessly. "I suppose there is no such thing as freedom in this life. If we are not shackled in one way, we are in another. And the worst shackles of all are those to our own cursed selves. I'm only dreeing my—what's it called?—weird. That's all."

"But you didn't know! You didn't know! You did what seemed right, at the time. That is what's so unfair. If—if you had been—if you had acted dishonorably, instead of marrying, you would have escaped all this. So—where is the justice?"

"Where is it often, Leo? We know we do wrong, and we escape. We think we do right, and are made to suffer. It's one of those mysteries one can't adjust. We are supposed to say, 'It is our own fault: we ought to have *known.*' Damn it all! How *can* we know? Might as well blame a kitten for falling into a well, before the fates opened its eyes."

This outburst was exactly to Leo's mind. "And no chance given to set things right! That is the cruellest injustice of all."

"The only chance of righting things is to do more

wrong," he remarked. "Funny; isn't it?" He glanced down at her head so near his arm. "That chance rests with me."

"With—you?" She looked up in some perplexity.

He nodded, watching her face. "If—if *I*—give *her* cause for a divorce, she might——" A choking exclamation from Leo caused him to break off. She loosed his arm and stood quite still in the woodland path, with an expression of horror, almost a recoil, in her eyes.

"You! You! Oh! Never—never—never! Whatever happens, Val, not—*that.*"

Standing before him, the sunlight filtering through the pine branches on to her hair, she covered her face with her hands. Surprise, consternation, a species of fear, mingled in the man's regard as he looked down upon her bowed head. He said nothing.

"I—I couldn't bear it." Her words were barely audible; in them was the sound of tears—the first tears he had ever heard there. Their effect was magical. All the cynicism vanished from his face, chased away by a smile that transfigured its beauty. He placed his hands over hers and drew them gently down.

"Why—Leo, dear?"

"I couldn't bear it," she repeated, her fingers clinging to his. "Let others smear themselves with mud if they like. But not *you.* Never *you.*"

The realization of the pedestal which he occupied in her idealism held him silent for a time, through a strange turmoil of feelings. "These things—are not thought so much of nowadays," he muttered at last.

"Val!" In her agitation, she shook the hands holding her own. "It is unlike you to talk like this. You are allowing yourself to become cynical. You are letting—this—master you——"

"But you would not think me justified in ending it?"

She drew up his hands, laying her cheek upon them. He had to bend down to catch her words.

"All that—that kind of thing is so repulsive! I'm not thinking of the moral point. It's the—beastliness— Oh! I know, nowadays, it is considered nothing. Books insinuate it to be the only real thing in life. They—they call it 'love.' . . . Love! That is so different—so absolutely different." She looked up into the eyes bent close above her own. The darkness of his thick crisp hair shone almost auburn in a ray of sunlight. "I couldn't bear to see *you* dragged through mud of that sort. All the best in me is bound up in our friendship. You have drawn it out—created it, very often——"

"Leo!"

"Yes, yes, I mean it," she interrupted passionately. "You—our friendship—is a symbol to me of everything that is—that is beautiful—that is not earthly, materialistic——"

"Leo!"

The fear in his voice arrested her words. For several seconds neither spoke. Each seemed to be searching the other's soul in the silence of the wood, where only the pines whispered above their heads. Then, another smile transfiguring his face, he bent his head and laid his lips to her clinging hands. Freeing himself gently, he turned away and leaned against a tree-trunk, gazing down a woodland glade, seeing nothing. . . .

Leo had not perceived the true drift of his remark, he realized clearly. The revelation in her words—the mixture of wonder, pride, shame and apprehension they produced—closed the door, at least temporarily, upon further strategic attempts. As a summer bee caught and caged in a room, he could but draw in his feelers on the glass through which

he coveted deliverance, and marvel at its purity, love its clarity, reverence its steadfastness, though these very facts proved such deliverance to be denied.

Her voice recalled him to actuality.

"Val"—she spoke with unusual diffidence—"you haven't—any rash designs——"

With a little laugh he swung his long limbs round and faced her, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his home-spun breeches.

"Any rash and evil designs? N-o. I hope not." At her expression of undisguised anxiety, he laughed again; then came forward and took her face between his hands. "Don't you think you mean just as much—and more—to me? In—bad moods, don't I always think of you? Will you give me a kiss, Leo?"

With renewed and smiling trust, she looked full into the deep smoldering eyes as she tilted up her face. The lingering pressure of his lips should have told her volumes, had not her woman's eyes been closed, like those of a kitten that falls into the well.

"Belovedest friend!" he whispered. . . . "Belovedest friend. . . ."

Slowly and rather silently they wandered on through the wood. Their path was bordered by wild strawberries, and a tangle of little flowers flanked by bushes or ferns. And always the pines sang overhead, the music of a distant sea. . . .

"Leo!" Val spoke suddenly, with unusual abruptness, evidently following some train of thought. "Why are you so afraid of—sex?"

She glanced up in surprise mixed with confusion. He met the glance with a smile. "Yes—you are. You always were. It is abused—lord knows! but it is not all—'beastliness.'" He passed an arm round her shoulders, and

went on in a lower tone. "It is part of love, little Leo. As much a part as the spiritual, while we possess material bodies, and live on the earth. Not quite 'so absolutely different' as you may imagine! When—when—you love—don't make a mistake. Don't be afraid to recognize—*both.*"

"But surely, Van, dear, it's a very minor part? The other seems so much greater, so much more *real.*"

He did not reply for a few moments. Like many young idealists, Leo was prone to turn her back upon ugly facts, or facts in any way disturbing. The relation of sex to love, brought crudely forward in certain aspects of the war, had never found satisfactory adjustment in her mind. Only the man who finally mastered her woman's nature could teach her that, for which she had received no preparation in a home life.

"It is so—I hope—I think," he replied at last, passing a caressing hand over her curly hair. "You are still the same strange mixture, Leo. Such an infant in some ways! I wonder if you will ever——"

"What?"

"I almost hope not."

"Do tell me what?"

He twined his finger in a wave of hair against her ear, and laughed provocatively. "I shan't. Go on being a sprite, Leo *mia.*"

Her elusiveness, if at times maddening, contained a certain charm and stimulation. While scattering the man's hopes with the effect of cold water on one who, lost in dreams, plunges head first into a river, it yet, as the cold water does, acted as a stimulant to all his latent strength. The physical side of his love, so forcibly awakened by this renewed and solitary contact, lowered, if but temporarily, its menacing head.

Leaving the wood, they passed through a meadow of

uncut tall grass soon to become hay. The scent of clover rose on all sides, its mauve blossoms forming a background to the taller blooms of every conceivable hue—chiefly yellow and blue—that danced in the breeze away to the somber lower flanks of the mountains.

Regardless of a farmer's possible maledictions, Leo threw herself down among the fragrant grasses.

"I want to be in it—*of* it!" she cried, burying her face in a clump of clover. "Oh, Val—isn't it lush?"

He threw himself down at her side. "Lush!" he echoed.

"I believe that word has some connection with meadow land. Therefore it is technically appropriate," she observed, chewing a reed.

"What does that matter?" He lay on his back and gazed up at the snowy peak of Eiger. "We *feel* a thing is lush. Therefore it is lush. Q.E.D. as Euclid would say. The sensible people of the earth take air, light, soil and seed, and from them produce lush grass. That is Q.E.F.—an entirely different matter. An odiously sensible matter."

"Anyway it is—satisfying." She stretched luxuriously. "If I had to die now I should be content. Wouldn't you?"

"No."

"Ah—that comes of being ambitious! You would rather break a larynx at Covent Garden or somewhere. Why are you so energetic?"

Val had unexpectedly sat upright, and was struggling to his feet. "Come along," he said, "let us keep moving."

All day they wandered, following the moment's whim: sometimes lured by the sound of a waterfall; sometimes being guided by a swiftly flowing stream; sometimes resting among flowers—always flowers—everywhere flowers—to watch the little clouds chase one another round a mountain peak. They gambled on these clouds, and Leo lost four shillings and ninepence halfpenny.

In the afternoon, quite unexpectedly, the Jungfrau threw off her gray veil, and exposed her arms of dazzling white, glancing down for a short time with sun-kissed, glittering smiles from her aloofness. But the Jungfrau is the shyest as well as the loveliest of mountains. No sooner had the pair recovered from their first transports at sight of this perfect purity, this rare and exquisite beauty, than she drew back her veil—first across her serene brow, then across her shining shoulders and softly gleaming breast.

"And we never knew!" exclaimed Leo, when once more, like Galatea returning to marble behind her shrouding curtain, the Jungfrau had retired from the eyes of human men.

"What?" Val asked.

"That she was there—like that. I thought those lower peaks were all."

"Isn't that usually the case? What those fine fellows who call themselves 'realists' always do? Because they don't *see* beyond the length of their noses, they decide there is nothing real beyond that radius."

Leo nodded, seating herself beside a mountain stream. "Mustn't it be dreadful to have to live among materialists? Where only food and money and that kind of—of obviousness count? Val—what would you do?"

"Go mad," he replied promptly.

He was gathering wild roses from a bush close by, and she watched him idly, her own artistic instincts finding a subtle delight in the grace of his movements, the ever-varying expressions chasing one another across his face.

"This damned materialism is becoming a positive menace," he went on. "And this mania for so-called 'realism.'"

"I never know what people mean when they talk of realism," confessed Leo, dabbling her fingers in the water.

"Nor do they, often!" he laughed. "They follow the ruck and cry the catchword. Life's crudities—its most

barefaced nakednesses—are called realistic. As if all the rest were not real too! All its beauties——"

"Of course. What is not real, in any way? Everything must be."

"An artist paints a picture of a street—crudely, just as every Tom, Dick and Harry sees it. That is called realistic. Another paints the same street—as he himself sees it—infusing into the scene all the beauty that to him lies behind every commonest stone. How many people would call that real?"

"It is—just as much."

"Probably more so." He brought his roses to her, and threw them into her lap. "Because it shows both realities—the spiritual and the material—the dual in everything. But it would probably be called 'impressionistic,' 'romantic.'" He sat down with a shrug. "The writer who makes one yawn through ten pages of description of the furniture in a room is considered real—so lifelike. And that is the rotten point. *Life* is only considered in its material aspect. What doesn't appear actual fact to those gentlemen of the short noses, is considered worthless. People who profess to Christianity are incapable, really, of belief in anything beyond the material facts of life."

"The question is," remarked Leo musingly, "which is the *most* real—not to any one person, I mean—but in itself?"

"Ah!" He took one of the rosebuds from her lap, and stroked its fragile pink petals in silence for a moment. "Both," he replied suddenly. "Because both are one."

"Oh—Val!" She smiled at him, her own idealism finding satisfaction in his. "That would need a lot of—what you called adjustment—in some cases—and readjustment——"

"And re-readjustment!" He laughed, throwing back

the flower. "Until we get to the other side of the Big Gulf —we may never see how that is done."

The girl nodded, looking round at the mountains, forests, flowers and lake. This was Beauty. And this was Real. And beside her reclined the man who also, to her, represented Beauty. A great wave of satisfaction seemed to engulf her heart—a sense of glorious contentment. . . .

The sun was gathering all the valley into a sheath of gold which quivered across the lake, when at last this ramble midst flowers and forests came to an end. Val had fallen silent, the pain at his heart aggravated by repression on the one side and intoxicating beauty on the other.

"What shall we do to-night?" Leo asked, on their way back to the chalet. "Will you sing to me again by the lake?"

"No."

Meeting her look of surprise, he waved a vague hand in the direction they had come. "There's a town over there, and a kursaal. We will walk in after dinner——"

"And sip things? One always sips pretty-colored drinks in casinos. And we can hear music——"

"And play roulette."

"Oh, yes—roulette. I have a *system.*"

"Indeed? What is it? Or is it a secret?"

"No. Quite simple. I throw on one number all the time until it turns up. It's sure to do so, sometime."

Val threw back his head with a shout of laughter. "Good old system! Take it for life, Leo. Always stake on one number until you win."

"You must, sometime," she repeated emphatically.

CHAPTER V

THIS intricate roulette "system" proved effective. Leo decided on *neuf*. With much solemnity she staked consistently upon *neuf*. And five times within about half an hour the little ball, after dancing and spinning, creeping and hesitating, settled comfortably in the dent of number nine. She raked in her winnings, each time giving Val a glance of odious "I told you so" superiority. He staked wildly, with sublime inconsequence. The lilt of music came through the open doors. Val was a reed, swayed by the south wind, buffeted by northern gales, every fiber responsive to the softest note. Sometimes he forgot to stake, drumming his fingers on the table to the rhythm of the distant band—watching the girl's every movement.

"I'm broke," he observed at last. "And I'm dry."

Leo was becoming tired of the game. "I'll stand drinks," she offered, with a winner's generosity.

They left the roulette table and entered the hall leading to the big concert-room. Leo stood still and clutched his arm. "Brahms—listen! . . . Oh! Brahms is like the wind racing through the tree-tops, with the rain pattering on the leaves! Poplar trees. . . . Don't you feel like one of the leaves, whirled around—flung up—flung down——"

"Leo—Leo! For God's sake come along. . . . Don't."

His voice was husky. He wrenched his arm free, and swung open the door. The full flood of intoxicating melody engulfed them. . . .

"What passion can not music raise and quell?"

It ever was, ever is and shall be: angel and devil cunningly guarding the portals of that art as of all others. Over one responsive to every faintest breath of a note, what power lies in the hands of either? The power to sway him, with the same bars of harmony, up to the stars or down to the lowest pit.

Leo, in a black filmy frock, a flush of excitement on her cheeks, looked more than usually provocative to-night. The angel and the devil each drew close to the man's elbow whispering, tempting, urging. . . . He sat down at the little table she decided upon, shaken and distrustful, struggling with a reckless craving to throw caution to the winds. His smoldering eyes devoured the girl's hair, white throat and neck, the soft rise and fall of her bosom under the black lace. . . .

When the last dance of the poplars in the wind fluttered into silence, a waiter appeared. Leo inquired the color of the drinks.

"I feel like something crimson," she explained. "And *monsieur aussi*—you want it lurid, don't you, Val?"

The waiter mentioned a name unknown to both.

"Oui," she said; *"deux.* Wake up, Val! Would you like one of those green things too?—like that man has over there——"

"Stop, Leo, stop! We don't want to stand on our heads. I—I feel I'm on mine, already."

"Yes, you look it," she observed frankly. "But you would if you heard a penny whistle played."

The crimson beverage was merely a sirup, for which fact Val mentally thanked his Maker.

Leo seized her straw and began the "sipping" operation.

"In books and in stuffy minds casinos are haunts of vice," she remarked inconsequently. "But if I were in church, I couldn't feel more virtuous!"

Val kept his eyes upon the straw, and sipped his drink in silence. Quite unexpectedly *à propos* of nothing, he burst forth, as a pent-up river when the flood-gate is down.

"It's marriage—the path of virtue—that leads one to the devil! I sometimes think it's the most cursed mistake of civilization."

"Good lord!" Leo nearly choked, and laid down her straw. She glanced at him shrewdly, knowing of the caged beast—ever beating impotently at the bars, craving for freedom—hidden behind those moody beautiful eyes.

"You can't treat marriage collectively—like men novelists often treat women: as if they're a herd of cows. It is entirely an individual concern. My friend Susie Murray and her Sam think it the only state like Heaven to be found on earth. They sit on a couch in their little vicarage, wearing golden crowns and playing harps."

Val smiled. "It's all right, I suppose, for cases that need it—like any other lunatic asylum. But there are many who are not fit cases. Some people—and I'm one—ought never to marry."

"It's a useful institution when one gets tired of other things and wants to be respectable," Leo observed weightily. "That is when I shall put my head in the noose."

"And suppose the noose strangles you?"

"I shan't let that happen," she replied, with the self-confidence of inexperience. "I'd sooner cut it."

The sound of instruments being tuned caused an expectant hush to fall upon the room. Leo leaned across the table and touched Val's hand. The careless banter had left her voice; her eyes were tender.

"Don't become a cynic, Val. You possess the sublimest gift—the power to *express*. You can gather all the joys and tragedies—the—the beauties of the universe—into yourself, then give them out—shower them around."

A burst of riotous music, barbarously, subtly Eastern, prevented his reply. His fingers gripped hers with a fierceness that made her wince. Then, very abruptly, he drew back, pushing his chair farther from the table. He clutched the arms so tensely that his knuckles shone white.

One side of the concert-room was open to the night, a flight of steps leading down to the garden where a fountain played in the moonlight. The perfume of shrubs and night-scented flowers blended with the music's intoxicating, swelling voluptuousness. Val did not know the thing being played. It inflamed his senses; caused his brain to reel as if he were being swept around in a whirlpool of dancers. Visions floated before his eyes of the moonlit lake, the lonely path through the meadows back to the chalet several miles away. . . . Soon now they would be there alone—he and she—alone in the night, in the isolation of a foreign country. . . . Val sought for his cigarette-case with trembling hands. The devil at one elbow clasped his arm, wriggled closer, whispered louder. The angel furled her wings; but her smile, though faint, was challenging. . . .

"It's a long walk back. Shall we go now?" Leo asked.

Val sprang to his feet. He cast a glance rather wildly over the silver garden and dark mountains beyond. Then he looked down at the girl's face, but his lips refused to utter a word. In silence he nodded, and followed her to the steps. Once in the garden, with the cool wind lifting the hair from his hot brow, he seemed to grasp the devilish form clinging round his neck, though the grasp was but a trembling one.

"Leo," he said hoarsely. "I—it's silly, but—I'm tired. D'you mind if we drive back—go by the road?"

"Of course I don't mind." She thrust her arm through his. And it seemed to Val as if the other with the furled wings had drawn thus close. He drew the hand down and held it—seemed to cling to it.

"Thanks," he said. . . .

Sitting in his corner of the fiacre, one long leg flung across the other, he clasped both hands round his knee and reviewed the situation—inspected the forces under his control, as a commanding officer who realizes the enemy's strength. Another day thus spent in lazy wandering in this land of enchantment would be fatal. He dared not face it. Another evening alone together by the lake or in this music laden, flower-scented atmosphere would be equally dangerous. Every turning revealed a menace.

He had come to Switzerland hoping—God knows what he hoped yet dared not formulate to himself. One short hour in the pine wood had chased those hopes, like leaves whirled in a gale. Sometime, he reflected vaguely, he would talk to Leo, would try to make her understand. . . . Sometime—when this first fever of reunion had abated, sometime. . . .

"You must be shockingly out of condition"—her voice recalled him from his bewildered reflections—"to be tired after such a lazy day. Shall we sit in a wood and talk, tomorrow?"

He uncrossed his legs, and turned to her hurriedly.

"On the contrary, I was about to suggest a really strenuous day's climbing on some of the lower slopes. Have you ever been up the mountains?"

"Never. It would be glorious—together, up there."

"I used to climb—real climbing—before the war. We can't do that now."

"Why not?"

"Too many avalanches about. You can't imagine what it's like, Leo, up in that world beyond the clouds——"

"Can't we go up a pass somewhere and stay? There are inns and places, aren't there?"

Val gazed steadfastly at the driver's broad back. "It—

would be very quiet—and solitary——" Fear urged him to remonstrance.

"All the better."

"There's nothing to do but ramble in the snow——"

"You could sing to me. Oh, yes, yes, Val! That's settled. After a week or two here, among the lower slopes, we will go up. We will think out a plan."

The word "kismet" came, unbidden, into the man's mind.

Clasp a burning iron tightly—and the first pain is scarcely felt. Val spent an almost sleepless night. He was pitiably aware of the weakness of his forces under the enemy's menace: knew well that the enemy was himself.

It is in these dark lonely hours that one's courage runs low. A weakness that was subtle strength urged him to flee. A strength that was subtle weakness urged him to stay. One rash word to Leo would ruin for ever her trust, would destroy their glorious friendship. To throw away the chance of this month together was to throw away the chance of water in a desert land. To stay was to scorch, to risk burning in a never-dying fire.

Val took this risk, and stayed.

He became possessed, Leo thought, by a restless devil of energy. Every day he announced fresh plans—plans that would occupy their bodies and their minds; so that at night they returned dead tired, only desirous of dinner and bed. They rowed on the lake; trudged miles to villages or little towns; climbed nearly all the lower slopes of mountains within reach; took mountain railways to higher points and struck off along pathways bordered by wild pansies, gentians, and patches of snow. And gradually Val drifted back into the old friendship of Army days, into the nonsense, the banter, the idealism. This gave him confidence. Once more he dared to sing when Leo begged for song. He thought he

had succeeded in strangling the enemy's advance-guard; and the confidence begotten of this thought carries one far toward success. He forgot the possibility of flank attacks or rear-guard action. . . .

One day they crossed the lake to Spiez, trained to Frutigen, and tramped to the well-known "Blue Lake"—a jewel of purest sapphire, in a setting of green-black firs, above and behind which tower precipitous mountains of shining snow. The intense hush of a cathedral broods upon the water, where never a ripple stirs. Veiled in the blue transparency lie long trees yet dressed in their leaves—dead, petrified, giants of far-gone ages—now white, ghostlike, embedded in a strange coral substance.

Leo and Val reached this wonderful bower of silence through little paths winding among rocks and shrubs. Emerging upon the very shore of the lake, with no sound in the world but a distant waterfall, they stood transfixed. Then, after a few moments, Leo turned along a tiny path skirting the water by the woods.

"Val!" she breathed, "this is where the 'Lordly Ones' bathe. Can't you imagine their white limbs 'like shafts of moonshine'? This must be one of the haunts of 'Midir.'" She walked on, up a little crag, then paused again and glanced around. "Beauty like this makes me feel—they must be real. Surely we shan't just petrify like those trees? This earthy life can't be all?"

"Do you ever doubt that?" he asked, sitting down on a tree stump.

"Yes—often. Don't you?"

"Never."

"Really? Why, Val?"

He threw a bit of bark into the still water and produced a little circle of ripples. "No *reason.* I just feel. For one thing——"

"Yes?"

"I am conscious—especially when I sing—of spirits about, close——"

"Val!" She turned wide eyes upon him.

"I sometimes think they hover round and lay a finger upon mortals, which inspires us to do things. Often I don't feel I sing of myself—scarcely even *by* myself."

Leo was watching him with absorbing interest. "That's genius," she observed.

"No. It's—I can't explain. It just is so."

She ruminated for a moment. "If that is true, it accounts for modern people's genius resembling that of some dead Master, yet never being quite the same," she said. "The dead still help in passing on the message. You artists have a foot in both worlds, and transmit from one to the other. It must be difficult to adjust them sometimes."

Val looked up at her and laughed. "And you expect me to believe you are a—a semi-atheist?"

"Semi—yes. Half of me. The scales go up and down. You send them up." He bowed his head into his arms.

"Oh, Leo, don't! Don't!" he muttered. "You don't know——"

She rumpled his dark hair with her fingers. "I do. The materialist half always dies when you sing. The other, which, in a way, belongs to you, is the one that will go on if any does."

Raising his face, he dug his finger-nails into the bark on either side of the stump, and stared at the fallen trees in the water.

"Suppose—Leo——"

"What?"

"You—you believe too much—expect too much. I'm only a reed. If—you found me a broken one——"

She laughed and flung herself down on the grass.

"Then I suppose your half would die in me and up would come the other. Oh, it's a responsible position to be a transmitter! You can't shirk it. Now let's have lunch. . . . You people are born to save the world from petrifaction through the materialism you talked about the other day. To make us realize we need not become like—those trees down there—"

"Oh, good lord, Leo!" He leaned down and clasped his hands round her slim throat and neck. "I won't endure any more of these responsibilities! Especially from you—the most irresponsible being in the universe." Holding her in compulsory speechlessness with one hand, he picked up one of the sandwiches she had unpacked, and stuffed it between her lips.

"Eat that, and don't talk for ten minutes. Now *I* will say a few words," he went on, releasing her in a gobbling half-choking condition. "When you have learned to love—to suffer, to—grow up—you won't place other people on pedestals and expect them to carry you along through life. You—you'll learn to live, yourself. You'll learn to—understand."

"What?" She gulped down the last of the sandwich.

"Life. Humanity. It's all a very mixed affair, Leo *mia*, not composed of pedestals and mud heaps. It's like one of these mountains—surrounded in clouds, muddy and dirty often at the base, and glistening white at the top——"

He broke off, conscious that she was laughing.

"If you don't want your lunch, Val, will you—instead of preaching—kindly sing? It suits you better."

Val seized another sandwich and advanced threateningly; but she sprang to her feet and fled down the path. . . .

At the end of the second week, dazzled by the mirage of self-confidence, he acceded to her demands for a few days up in the mountains. This time it was she who waved aside names and details.

"Don't tell me where we are until we leave," she begged. "Don't make it—finite, in any way. We will go right up into that world, among the snow, and let the clouds shut us off from the world below."

They were too much engrossed to take interest in their fellow-guests at the little hotel. These were chiefly Swiss or French. With characteristic charm they greeted the pair with soft smiles and friendly glances, but never sought to intrude. Nobody showed inquisitive curiosity over their affairs or their relationship. There was not a single "fly in the ointment," as Leo observed one day.

But a fly finds its way into most ointments, sooner or later, when the stopper is left off.

On the last day of their sojourn on Lake Thun, they returned in the evening from a long tramp to find luggage being carried into the chalet.

"New arrivals," murmured Val.

Leo glanced at the backs of the man and woman in the doorway. Square, thick-set, each wore a tweed suit and felt hat, of that eminently practical sort procured by the strong-minded for traveling.

"English!" Leo muttered, without hesitation.

When they entered the hall, the newcomers turned and stared with cool deliberation. The woman's eyes traveled from the girl's sunburned face to her dusty boots.

"Very English!" chuckled Val, pushing her up the stairs. "A respectable, solid business man and wife. I haven't met the type for years!"

"His wife, certainly," she laughed. "Those clothes would never go about with anything that wasn't their husband!"

"That's rather neat. Men are often but the husbands of their wives' clothes."

"Cynic!"

She paused at her bedroom door. "You thought you had room in your hand-bag for my shoes. Come and get them."

They intended to deposit their luggage in a hotel at Grindelwald, thence climb to the pass whose name both refused to recognize lest it should dispel the romance of mountainous infinity.

He followed her into her room, where she pounced upon a heap of footwear, and began to throw shoes and boots into his arms.

"These—they're so strong. And these—in case the others get wet. And these—they're pretty——"

"My good lunatic, I can't take the lot!" He sank on the bed to save them all falling. "What about my own—and my collars and pajamas——"

"Go without, if there's any crush! Oh, lor-r-d!"

The door was wide open, facing the bed. At this psychological moment the two new arrivals passed slowly by to their room. With the same hard quizzing look in their eyes, both stared in.

Val whistled, and his eyes danced. He glanced up at the ceiling, then sidewise at Leo. She shook her head and mimicked their expression.

"I don't wonder they disapprove. There is a very questionable air about you, Val—very questionable. No—don't throw shoes at me! It's that glad-eye trick; and your hair is on end——" She patted it down. "At any rate it's genuine. Not oiled to look black, or marcel-waved. And you can't help your looks. I'll tell her she need not be nervous."

He put out his tongue and winked. "Sarah will now go down and study the visitors' book."

"'Sarah'? Oho! She has probably recognized you already. She looks the kind of person who devours illustrated journals. Now, run away. If you can't stuff in all the shoes, bring them back later."

Val's prophecy proved correct. When they passed through the hall to dinner the Englishwoman's gray head, with its artificial "front," was bent over the book on its little stand. A few moments later she strolled past their table and bestowed a glance that would have frozen a hot-bed.

The girl shivered involuntarily. "Didn't she block the sunset?"

He smiled across the table with kindling eyes. Leo was looking radiantly fair in a frock of something soft and creamy. The rays of the setting sun caught the fires in the hair clustering around her ears; made rosy the white skin of her neck and arms. "You and I have never been bound by the nets of that kind of people. I suppose we are shocking her conventions," he said—rather as if he enjoyed the idea.

After dinner Leo suggested a last row on the lake. "Before 'Sarah' gets a chance to speak to us. She's the kind who would butt in. Her eyelash is inquisitive. It's the only one she's got, poor soul."

"I'd like to pull it out," he replied, glancing across the room to find the woman's eyes fixed upon his own face.

There was no afterglow to-night. The lake's dull silver, shadowy with mountain reflections, was shot here and there with long yellow streaks and patches of orange from the swiftly setting sun. Leo curled herself up on a cushion at the bottom of the boat, and trailed her fingers lazily in the water, watching Val's vigorous movements, always so full of unconscious grace.

"To row like that, directly after dinner, proves an excellent digestion," she remarked. "D'you remember that man in camp who talked so much about food and wine? How bored he and other materialists will be when they are dead! What will they find to do?"

Val rested on his oars.

"There may be a special little heaven reserved for them,

with bulging cellars and fat larders. No prohibition or Early Closing Act. No taxes. A big bank of never-failing gold——"

"But nothing to buy with it?"

"Oh, yes. Miles of shops full of wonderful things, and great barns which each person can stuff with purchases, then empty and stuff again. That will occupy them through all eternity."

Leo gave a little snort of contempt, and settled herself more comfortably in the boat. "Things—things—things," she muttered. "I wonder what they are: real or symbols?"

"Both, probably—with a little adjustment."

She smiled lazily. "If—as you said—both reals are one."

He made no reply, but bent over his oars again. The boat shot forward, the water rippling and sucking softly round the prow. Both fell silent, wrapped in their own thoughts, which were interspersed by snatches of song, sung half below Val's breath. The words were usually Italian, which she did not understand; but the voice that sang drew her, with its peculiar power over her spirit, out of the world of facts and "things" into subtle communion with the spirit hovering round the mountains and over the lake in the fast-gathering dusk. The ecstatic restlessness those strange moments usually produced was absent in the presence of Val. Instead, she breathed the wondrous peace of home—the fulness of intercourse with one who was no mate of the flesh, no companion of leisure hours alone.

They had come far out on the lake. Save for a gentle breeze, such a stillness and silence fell with the dusk that the world beyond the mountains might have dropped away. Instead of peace, a great depression settled upon Val—bore him down, so that his lips ceased to sing. One of those hollow moments when the gold of achievement appears but dross gripped him with clammy fingers. Increasing power,

swiftly-rising position in the world of music, satisfaction of the inborn craving to express—what else had the past years of drudgery brought him? Merely the loneliness of one whose very gifts and nature formed a gulf between himself and coarser, mundane spirits. By one youthful, impetuous mistake he had robbed himself of the love that could have turned the gulf into a garden of flowers. Artificial flowers could be his any day. But Val was fastidious; substitutes could not satisfy his craving for the real.

The business man, his mind given to practical problems and the acquisition of money; the inventor, full of diagrams, angles, science; the explorer, his eyes fixed on the far-distant scenes;—these may fill their lives, even marry and continue the race, and know content, though love should pass them by. But to the artist, the idealist, the dreamer—whatever his vocation—love is the supreme reality, the inspiration, the pivot of his life. Without it he is a ship without a rudder, floundering in rough seas or smooth, now and then brought close to islands which prove to be deserts.

Val's desolation had in it something prophetic. He glanced down the future, full, probably, of fame, success, and all they bring in their train. And the future years looked hollow as a nutshell with the kernel missing. Only Leo could truly fill their emptiness. . . . He let the boat drift and looked down at her shadowy figure. She made no movement. Leaning forward, he saw that her eyes were closed. She was asleep or far from him in thought. For a moment it seemed as if she, too, with the distant world, had dropped away. . . .

He shipped his oars, propped his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, watching the girl's unconscious face. Idealism may be higher and finer in many ways, but it is in the nature of a husk to a man craving the fruit of a woman's love. Whether he lived up to its pedestal, or threw it down

in the dust, the husk-like emptiness of the future would be his. Never by word or sign had Leo shown other than a friendship divinely sincere.

The yearning in his gaze was that of a caged soul struggling for freedom, for the other soul that alone can set it free. Mingled with the yearning was fear of the dark loneliness of its cage; of the forces, too, which might impel the wrenching down of the cage's bars.

Leo stirred and opened her eyes, as if conscious of his need of her. He dropped a hand on her ankle, encircling it with clutching fingers.

"Wake up, Leo. Come back!" he cried impulsively.

"What's the matter?" She sat upright. "You look scared. What is it, Val?"

"I—I am scared. Leo—it seemed—I felt as if I had lost you, and was—*alone*. . . . It's always this loneliness that creeps up—swamps me—sometimes in the night, sometimes in the day, the sunshine. It is a curse, a mania——"

"Val, Val!" All the sympathy in the universe echoed in her voice, though she was far from understanding his full meaning. Twisting round on the floor, she leaned against his knee and took both his hands in hers. "You can always count on me. You know that. What did you call me on our first day here?"

He dropped his face into her hair. "Belovedest—belovedest——"

"—friend." She finished softly, what his lips had not finished. "Such lovely words. Don't they count—at those times?"

He sat up and looked into her frank eyes, in the dim starlight.

"Yes—yes, Leo! They—they count. . . . Shall we row back, now?"

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS later than they imagined when at last they entered the chalet. Leo hurried up-stairs to finish her packing, while Val stopped for a cigarette and a drink before making his way to bed. In the same mood of abstraction in which he had rowed back, he proceeded to undress and pack simultaneously. It was not until both operations were complete, that he realized he had no room for some of Leo's shoes. One pair must be returned before her own luggage was fastened preparatory to their early start next morning. Flinging on a dressing-gown, he hurried down the corridor to her room.

She opened the door at his knock, a blue wrapper only half concealing her white neck and flimsy nightdress.

"Curse!" she exclaimed fervently. "They will have to go on the top of my hats; I can't unpack again. Hello!"

The opposite door opened unexpectedly, a head was thrust out, and a pair of boots plumped upon the landing.

"Sarah!" muttered the girl.

"Damn!" replied Val. "Their name is Blake. I looked in the book."

"She's shed her front. It was an awful sight!"

As Val looked down at the other sight, so dainty, and so alluring by her very lack of attempt to allure his pulses beat faster and a flush rose to his face. Leo saw it and laughed.

"You're blushing. I believe you're shy." Still laughing, she unexpectedly clapped a hand to each of his cheeks,

raised herself on her toes, and lightly kissed his lips. "You old dear! Now run away to bed."

Val found himself outside a closed door. He turned away, his pulses hammering in his head, and went back to his room. Its bareness and emptiness seemed a physical blow, as he crossed the threshold.

The touch of Leo's lips, her delicate perfume, had got into his senses, mixed with the vision of that soft form. . . .

He flung himself down on his own bed, and covered his eyes with his hands. Some day some one would conquer her shrinkings, some day some one would win her woman's heart—not her idealism nor, maybe, her friendship. Who would that be? Who would gain the right. . . . That door would not always be closed. . . . Who—ah, God! *Who* would that be? . . .

They left the chalet early next morning, before the other visitors put in an appearance.

"I'd like to kiss Sarah good-by," Val observed plaintively, as their fiacre drove out of the gates.

"It would be your last day on this earth, my good lad, if you did!"

"That wouldn't matter.

> "A man had given all other bliss,
> And all his worldly worth for this,
> To waste his whole heart in one kiss
> Upon her perfect lips."

"But Guinevere had a front, when Lancelot felt like that!" she reminded him, laughing.

"Can you understand anybody feeling like that, Leo?"

"No. I can't."

She leaned forward, and looked eagerly at the white crest of Eiger, as they rounded a corner. Then she waved a hand to include the whole range of mountains.

"We're coming up! Val—isn't it going to be simply —glorious?"

A tiny screw often has a value wholly disproportionate to its size. In after years Leo was wont to trace the chief events of her life back to the failure of one screw in their plans of to-day.

The mountain railway's quaint little train would deposit them at Grindelwald. No hitch occurred during the first mile or so. Then, abruptly, the train stopped. The sound of men's voices, mingled with metallic knocking and tapping, caused heads to be thrust out and conjectures to pass to and fro in the open, truck-like carriages. Presently the voices and noises ceased, and the train began to move slowly backward. Before it had retraced a quarter of the distance, however, it stopped again. The voices, tappings, unanswered conjectures, were repeated until at last, deciding that nothing after all was really wrong, the train forged once more ahead.

About an hour had been wasted. Val turned this to account by frightening a German sitting opposite, with lurid tales in his own tongue of accidents on the mountains. Leo backed these up with fearful surmises and furtive giggles. Thus the hour, whose loss was one of Fate's wildest, wantonest strokes in both their lives, was lightly thrown away.

The very polite concierge who took their luggage to the hotel, offered to phone for rooms at the one inn up the Kleine Scheidegg Pass. That would insure "a velcome," he said, in his suave broken Swiss. "You vill start aht once, not com' to the 'otel first? *Ja?* It vill be arl raht. Leave ever'thing to me. *Es ist ein—ein——*" At a loss for English, he waved his arms to express the height they had to traverse.

Val gave some brief directions in German. But German is not quite the same as Swiss. The concierge, like most

voluble people, was not an over-attentive listener. Val's directions were usually vague. . . .

Knapsacks on their backs, stout alpenstocks in their hands, they passed through the little town to the mountain path leading toward the lower flanks of Eiger and Mönch. A tiny cog-and-pinion mountain railway ran almost parallel on a higher slope on their left, but this, in their youth and strength, they scorned. Though the pastures were thick with flowers, the world of snow was very near now. It scintillated as far down as the railway line, and, in patches, yet lower. Higher up, a ring of puffy clouds resembling nymphs in pale, trailing draperies crept slowly round Eiger's crest and a distant peak of the Jungfrau. Away to the right stretched another lower ridge, its green peaks tipped only here and there with white, as if a giant painter had dropped occasional splashes from his tubes of white paint. High above, but straight ahead, the pass for which they were making formed a white sky-line, sharply silhouetted against a vividly blue sky.

The wonderful exhilaration of the air helped, with Leo's radiant spirits, to chase away Val's mood of the previous night. In a world of sunshine there is always hope. The past rolls away and the future reveals untold possibilities. He became boyishly light-hearted, propounding inane riddles which she always guessed. Then they told a never-ending story. Leo began, leaving him to continue at the first intricate moment. He switched it back to her at the next and worst; then she tossed it back to him. When the heroine had been married to the villain—who stabbed everybody, including the hero—and had committed suicide, then appeared as a ghost and robbed somebody's safe; and the somebody—thinking the villain to be the thief—had murdered him, and *his* ghost had run away with the other ghost, the authors sat down to eat their belated lunch.

"Only Dante could carry on now," Leo declared breathlessly, lying on her back so that she could see nothing save blue sky and an endless array of glittering mountain peaks.

"Surely these are some of the hills where the Lordly Ones dwell?" she mused.

Val glanced round from the lunch he was unpacking.

"Yes," he agreed, quickly responding to her mood. "They dwell in all the hills and in all the valleys. They sail on all the seas and float down all the rivers. Don't they?"

"*You* nearly make me believe they do," she murmured.

"They would take us with them if only we could—free ourselves——" A light that was almost mystical darkened his eyes.

> "How beautiful they are,
> How beautiful . . ."

She looked up, arrested by something in his voice—an intentness that caused the words to resemble more a statement of fact than a poetic idea.

"We are so *bound*—so clogged, and by ourselves—here. Oh, Leo! You don't really doubt?"

"I do, Val. Sometimes I lose touch——"

"Ah, but not the *real* you!" He leaned nearer, unusually earnest. "More than anybody I know you are, at heart, conscious of the—the spiritual behind the material. Your reason and intellect may doubt. Present-day life tends to make them do so. But you are not bound by intellect—you are far beyond that limitation. Your worship of Beauty is not a cold intellectual admiration of technical points. You don't care what substance these mountains are made of, though the knowledge might interest your brain. You don't care if they are ten or twelve or thirteen thousand feet high——"

"No. But——"

"It's the spirit of them that your spirit acclaims. The real you *feels,* and therefore knows—in the same way you know the Jungfrau is always there, like she is now, when the mists have hidden her. Things, in themselves, are not your gods. It's the *something behind* all the tangible. . . . There's nothing like an irritant to help uncertainty. If you are plunged among materialists, they would drive you into your real self—your real beliefs——"

"Or strangle them?"

He gave a little shrug as he opened a packet of sandwiches. "Temporarily—maybe. But not for long."

Leo took a sandwich and devoured it before replying.

"I think perhaps you artists find it easier," she observed at last. "Because you have, as I said before, a foot in two worlds. The Lordly Ones give you their messages direct, and you pass them on to us."

"You forget," he said, "that there is a possible third world in which our feet may stick."

"What's that?"

"Well——" He helped himself to another sandwich, and regarded it thoughtfully. "If an artist's feelings are so —intensified, doesn't he feel the—the carnal things much more strongly too? Aren't his temptations often far greater? His struggles more painful? Isn't he probably far weaker than another of a phlegmatic temperament?"

"He ought not to be," she announced coolly. "They only balance his gifts."

"But—damn it, old thing—your artist is only a human clod, after all! If you idealize too much, Leo, you will get some awful bumps. Remember how terrific may be his struggles; think of the forces pulling both ways—the—— Oh! those thick-skinned people who condemn so easily—what do they know? What do they know?"

He had sprung to his feet, and she looked up at him in surprise. "I'm not condemning. But, if he has more to contend with, hasn't he also a finer nature to help him than those of grosser clay? Am I intolerant?" A sudden realization of something personal in all this, caused her to stretch out an impulsive hand.

"A little," he replied, catching the hand.

"Why don't you kick me?"

He smiled, sitting down at her side, and clasping her hand close.

"You will understand some day—when that nut of yours is cracked! When you do—will you tell me?"

"Of course. Wouldn't it be my first impulse? Why, Val? Why do you look—— Ah! what's that?"

An ominous rumble like thunder reverberated among the mountains, growing louder, nearer, until a final clap rang out seemingly above their heads, followed by a strange, continuous roaring sound.

They were sitting close under the bank of the railway, on a kind of ledge which shelved down fairly precipitately into a grassy dip of some six feet. Val had scrambled to his feet at the final clap.

"An avalanche—somewhere near—" He looked quickly round; but the bank just behind hid the lower part of the peaks beyond, from the side of which the avalanche had fallen. It is seldom easy to locate the sound in time to watch the beginning of these terrific landslips of snow. Before either of the pair had become aware of his own danger, the sky was veiled in whirling masses of white; their ears were deafened by the crash of wooden palisades and telephone posts, the roar of metal being ripped up, the rushing of a mighty torrent—a force that swept away all the puny atoms in its path. . . .

Out of some vague, far-off place, Leo's mind came back

to a realization of movement—a strange, swaying movement. Opening her eyes she tried to rise, but a stabbing pain in her head caused her to fall back. The movement abruptly ceased. Val's face appeared, very white, a blood-stained handkerchief round his forehead. Too much effort was needed to comprehend his agitated broken words. She felt something hard upon her lips, and struggled against the smell and taste of brandy. Then everything became blurred, and she felt horribly sick. She closed her eyes and lay quite still. . . .

Some buildings loomed up with startling suddenness, before which the back of a strange man's head bobbed curiously.

"Funny!" she thought aloud.

Again Val's face—hot and flushed now—bent above her own.

"We are nearly there. It's all right," he said.

In a flash memory returned—the crash, the roar, the dizzy whirl of snow over the railway bank, the ineffectual grip of Val's hand, the moment's horror upon losing foothold and balance. . . .

Somebody was helping him to carry her on a rough wooden plank up the railway track. When she moved, an agonizing pain gripped her right foot. She felt extraordinarily giddy.

"Aren't you hurt, Val?" she muttered.

"Only some scratches."

"What happened to us—after——?"

"A piece of wood from the railway palisades caught you —you let go——" He stopped, and she realized vaguely that his voice was unsteady. "The main bulk had blocked the line. Only the last bit came over. . . . Luckily this man was not far off. . . ."

The strangely husky voice trailed away again. Leo lay

inert, looking around the mountain world she had wished to penetrate. In her present condition she felt almost appalled by the majesty of silence. The footfalls of the two men sounded uncannily distinct. From the far, far distance rose a faint sighing sound that might have been the breathing of the human world below, where a myriad pines whispered, and waterfalls fell softly. It was evidently evening. All the white crests gleamed golden where the long shafts from the setting sun caressed them; the shadows were slate gray.

The sound of mortal voices near the hotel, and the sight of their figures, seemed almost incongruous. They looked ridiculously small, drab, unimportant. From the proprietor to the boot-boy, men cropped up in rabbit-like profusion peculiar to continental hotels.

Val laid his burden down on the wide veranda, while he held a brief consultation with the proprietor and the concierge. Then he bent over Leo.

"There's no doctor up here. The telephone wires are broken by the avalanche, and the last train went down the other line to Lauterbrunnen an hour ago. Leo"—he laid his hand over hers—"I understand first aid——"

"Send all those staring people away, Val!" Reaction was overtaking the girl's highly-strung nerves; she spoke impatiently, clutching his hand, struggling against a wild desire to cry. "Don't let any of them mess round me."

"No—no. Can you sit up?" He dropped on his knees and passed an arm beneath her shoulders, gently raising them. "I want to carry you straight to your room. Tell me if I hurt."

With a strength that surprised her he lifted her into his arms, and followed the proprietor through the door of the hotel, up a twisting flight of shallow stairs, along a corridor, and into a large room already nearly dark. Here the man switched on the light and vanished. Val laid the girl

on the bed. Then, for a moment, the strain of the past hours relaxed. He forgot his habitual guard. The clasp of his arms tightened, and he bowed his face upon her hair, muttering brokenly her name.

She moved her head, in part because the pressure of his arm was painful, in part with the instinct to comfort. At once his lips were pressed to her own. Beyond a vague idea that he was, like herself, unhinged, she had no time to wonder at his unusual manner before he started up again at a movement in the room. A woman had entered with bandages, jars of ointment and embrocation.

With an effort he regained his self-control, sat down on the bed, and began to unlace Leo's boots. She buried her face in her hands to hide its wincing at every lightest touch.

The woman could talk nothing but German, and seemed loath to employ much of that. Val cursed her silently for a sheep. She showed no initiative beyond fetching a basin and a can of hot water. He sent her for another of cold.

The ankle of Leo's right foot was swelling rapidly, and discolored lumps made shapeless the knee. The right wrist was sprained slightly, but no bones were broken. The woman, set to attend to the wound on the girl's head, seemed hypnotized by Val's face and deft fingers as he attended to the other injuries. She allowed water or embrocation to trickle down unheeded into Leo's neck until she cried out in remonstrance.

"Her fingers are like sandpaper," she said. "Send her away." He knelt down by the bed and passed his fingers over her temples, and she closed her eyes. "Your touch is wonderful, Val. Send that woman away, if you have finished. Tell her we don't want her any more."

Rashly, without forethought, he acceded to her request. The woman gathered together her cans and departed, muttering sullenly something neither could understand.

"How wonderfully still it seems—not a sound!" the girl murmured, half to herself, watching him.

"We are the only visitors at present," he replied, going to the window to look out at the mountain peaks in the gathering dusk. "It's early yet, for these heights."

From where she lay, she could see nothing but snow, snow, endless snow, above which a few early stars twinkled in the darkening sky.

"It is rather weird." She turned her aching head restlessly on the pillow. "We might be at the North Pole together —just you and I. I have never *felt* such isolation, such—helplessness."

Val turned back from the window, and looked down at her flushed face. He also was conscious of a terrifying sensation of helplessness, though not of the kind she meant. All the mirage of self-confidence seemed to be fading, as the Alpenglühen faded their first night on Thun.

"You . . . I forgot—you ought to go to bed. That woman——"

"No—no. Don't fetch her back—yet."

There came a knock at the door, and the proprietor appeared. In the background hovered waiters with trays. In slow and careful English the man explained that, the dinner-hour being long past, he had ordered a leetle supper to be brought for "Madame"—two leetle suppers, in case they liked to have them together.

Leo drew a sigh of relief. Her nerves felt strangely unhinged. She was conscious of a childish dread of being left, a shrinking from more attempts to move.

"I must find my room, and wash first," Val protested, as the waiters entered with their dishes. But she caught hold of his homespun jacket. "Not now—while these men are about——"

"Yes, but—oh, dash! the proprietor has disappeared."

"You can wash over there—at my washstand——"

"But——" Conscious of her clutching fingers, he hesitated, glancing irresolutely at the one remaining waiter. Then, abruptly, he drew his jacket free and asked for his room. The man looked mystified. He was new, he explained in French. He did not know about the rooms. . . .

"Blockhead!" The waiter bowed himself out, not understanding this word, but feeling retreat the safest procedure. Val strode across to the washstand and seized the jug. "Hello!" he exclaimed. "There's another bed here, behind the door. I didn't see it before. Would you rather have it?"

"This will do," she replied indifferently.

For a few moments he splashed vigorously at the cuts on his forehead caused by flying bits of stone, and the cold water acted as a tonic to his unhinged nerves. He turned round, drying his hands. "If that bally train to Grindelwald had not jibbed, we should have escaped the—— Hello! Both our hand-bags are in here."

"The porter didn't know the difference, of course."

An uneasy suspicion of what had happened caused a hot flush to overspread his face. "Leo—I—I must go and find the proprietor."

"Why! Your dinner will be cold. Come and have that, first!" She glanced up at his tall form, and the damp hair clustering in its attractively boyish way about his ears and brow. His sudden flush seemed to her, as it had done the night before, that of embarrassment. And it enhanced him in her eyes—sent his pedestal up several inches higher. She stretched out her hand.

"Come along and eat. If I weren't the corpse I should be enjoying this funeral. It's quite a little adventure."

"You—you want propping up." He fetched the pillows from the other bed and placed them behind her, raising her

against them. She caught his fingers and pressed them. But he drew back with a little ejaculation, and seized a dish-cover—and his hands were shaking so that he knocked over a glass. . . .

CHAPTER VII

THE English race was certainly mad. The Swiss proprietor had long suspected that fact: now he was sure. So early in the summer season his staff and cuisinary arrangements were not complete. Nevertheless, when the concierge brought him a telephone message from Grindelwald ordering accommodation for an Englishman and his wife, he obeyed it to the letter. Only a few bedrooms were, as yet, in use. The best of the double ones was prepared. A dinner was cooked. But these "dotty Engleesch" did not arrive on the morning train. They elected to walk. (Walk! *Mein Gott!* When they might have sat still!) They even placed themselves in the direct line of the avalanche, which—as all this mountain world knew—was due to fall any day now. The dinner was wasted. The staff—kept on duty in this dullest of neighborhoods instead of going down to other, more habitable spots—grew bored after the first excitement of the guests' belated arrival. Those not needed for the supper, departed on quests of love or other matters; or they went to bed.

And now, what must the brainless Englishman do but leap down-stairs several steps at a time and talk about "his room." Vhat room? Vas not ze one he had good 'nough? No other room vas prepared.

Val expostulated—nervously, hurriedly, with flushed face and stammering voice. Another room must be prepared at once. The proprietor demurred: it vas late—ever'body out or in bed. . . . Val insisted, clutching the hall table with

one hand, pushing the hair from his hot brow with the other. At last the man went away, rather uncertainly, to see about the matter—first drawing Val's attention to the visitors' book. That the misconstruction was quite an honorable one, only needing contradiction, Val failed, in the turmoil of his emotions, to realize. Fuming over "these damned foreigners' minds," he seized the pen and scrawled his name.

His fingers were shaking. Throwing down the pen, he paced across the hall, cursing below his breath. His every nerve was on edge. The shock earlier in the day, the intoxication of this isolation with Leo, the past intimacy alone together in her room, the unusual amount of wine he had drunk to drown that intoxication—all these allied themselves with the usual enemy forces. He had been caught unprepared, in a vicious flank attack. He was shaken, insecure, a prey to the devilish voices within, the spider's net spread about his feet by a dogging fate. While urging the proprietor with his lips, every instinct cried its denial. While listening with his ears for the man's acquiescence, his throbbing heart prayed traitorously for a refusal. . . .

The figure with the furled wings drew back. The other guardian of his soul's portals drew close . . . whispered . . . urged . . . wilily. . . .

Leo loved him in one sense—the sense in which she recognized love. Would such a chance to teach her the full meaning of the word ever come again? They belonged to each other in ways known to few—even in marriage. Why should another, to whom she might never belong, in this way, sometime claim the woman, leaving him only the friend?

But reasoning proved impossible, overwhelmed by longing—by desire that surged over him in flames, enveloping his frail resources until they were burned up into cinders. To his emotional temperament, sensitive to every influence,

the wild desolate beauty around had been the match set to inflammable material already deluged with oil. The hall seemed hot, suffocating—though the stove was out and icicles hung outside the windows. He strode to the door. It was securely fastened for the night. He hurried to each window in turn. The shutters were also fastened for the night.

All the world was wrapped in darkness—shut away—fastened, as it were, for the night.

All the men and women, birds and beasts, were hidden away too, in the darkness, for the night—alone . . . or with their mates.

That room was his . . . his . . .

At the mercy of some unformed, wild idea, he started down the passage after the proprietor—then halted, almost swayed back against the wall paneling, at sight of his returning figure. The man eyed him curiously. A bed was being prepared, he said, in the room communicating with his present one. It would be ready within ten minutes.

Val muttered his thanks, his hot hands opening and closing convulsively. Instead of a cold water douche, more oil had been thrown upon the conflagration. He walked back to the hall in silence. Then he ordered a strong whisky-and-soda.

The proprietor brought the drink himself, with the information of the second room being ready. Val muttered a *"Danke schön,"* and mechanically responded to his *"Gute nacht."*

Left alone, he threw himself down on the arm of a chair, and tossed off his drink in a few gulps. He placed the empty glass on a small table at his elbow, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and stared hard at his boots.

The spirit ran hotly down his veins, stimulating his nerves instead of calming them.

That room was still, in essentials, his. He had noticed the communicating door. . . .

Instead of his own strong boots, he saw Leo's white feet with their bruises, the swollen ankle, the slender curves of the knee he had massaged. . . .

Leo—Leo—Leo—she was here, there, all around him in this mountain fastness: helpless, at his mercy, tender and lovable, altogether desirable. Not the Leo whose companionship of mind and spirit was such a force in his life, but Leo the woman of warm flesh and blood. . . . He glanced toward the stairs, rising impetuously to his feet, the passion of desire conquering every other impulse. Then he sank back again, covering his hot face with his hands.

And the angel and the devil, which guard the portals of Love as well as all others, wrestled together ruthlessly, chaotically, so that the wings of the one were torn and bloodstained, and her great heart was bleeding too.

The clock in the hall struck twelve. Val started up, his face drawn, quivering. He pushed back the damp hair from his forehead, and moved slowly across the hall to the stairs. Irresolutely he ascended each step and walked down the corridor, past Leo's door to the open one of the next room from which the light blazed. Pulling the door to, he leaned against it for a moment, clinging to the handle, his glance magnetized by the other door in the room.

The remembrance of his hand-bag flashed across his mind. It contained all his night things. It was in the room beyond. . . .

Loosening the handle he crossed unsteadily to the window, unfastened the shutters and flung them wide. The air at this altitude proved almost as intoxicating as spirits. Val leaned far out. The dark sky was only relieved by a few stars. In the surrounding blackness two strips of snow shone ghostly, illumined by the light from two windows—

his and Leo's. Only he and Leo seemed to be alive in this remote dark world. . . .

Drawing quickly back, he glanced again at the communicating door. Such a frail barrier! So easily removed. . . . Hastily he turned away again and gazed out at the two white patches of snow. They dazzled his eyes, beckoned. . . . He whipped round, gripping the shutter as if afraid, and his glance fell on the bed. The soft pink square, like a fat eider-down—he forgot the French name—exactly matched that upon Leo's bed next door.

The shutter slipped from his hand and closed noisily, followed by a sound that sent the hot blood rushing to his head. The pulses beating in his throat caused him to choke. Again . . . from beyond the door he was trying to forget, came the call of his name. Though burning hot, he shivered in every limb. Without being aware of having moved, he found his hand on the door-knob.

The frail barrier was drawn back.

An electric bulb over the bed turned every wave of hair to flame on the white pillows. With cheeks flushed and eyes unnaturally bright she lay still dressed, on the bed. The contents of her hand-bag were spread upon the quilt.

"Where have you been, Val? Why didn't you send that woman to help me undress?"

"I—I—forgot——" He muttered the words, thickly, standing in the doorway and gazing across at the form on the bed. He seemed powerless to do more than cling to the door and gaze upon her, with his darkened brilliant eyes. The strangeness of his tone caused her to look at him more fully. At sight of his face, her brow puckered. Vaguely uneasy, she remained silent for a moment.

"What is it?" she asked, with some hesitation. "Are you—ill?"

He shook his head, but did not move. When he spoke

there was the same thick slow articulation in his voice. After his usual beautifully modulated tones, it sounded strangely unnatural.

"Everybody is gone to bed. I couldn't get a room at—at once. A mistake had been made. . . . Only one room." His eyes strayed to a flimsy affair of ribbon and silk lying carelessly over her knees, waiting until she should undress. "All the world is in bed——"

"Oh!"

She lay still, the uneasiness growing, yet unformulated. In some subtle fashion this was a new strange Val whom she had never met. For the first time she missed the glorious sense of *oneness.*

"I tried to undress myself," she said at last; "but I can't get out of my jumper. This wrist, and the bandages—— Could—could you help? Then I shall manage."

Again without volition the man found he had moved, and had reached her bedside. As he bent down to take the collar she indicated, his fingers touched the warm skin of her neck, her hair caressed his cheek. . . . With dazed senses and no conscious power of his own, he helped her free of the garment. Then his hand came in contact with soft warm flesh between her shoulders. . . . The room swung round. His burning eyes could only see bare rounded arms; white neck, a little sunburned under her throat; soft curves of her breast hidden by silk with an outline of ribbon. . . . For an instant he met, as in delirium, the eyes raised in sudden alarm. . . .

Then he was on his knees by the bed, her warm young body crushed in his arms.

The warfare between the guardians of the man's portals was over for the moment—lost and won.

Mad with sheer animal passion, he stifled her cry of fear, pressing her lips back upon her teeth with his kisses.

They were savage kisses that scorched; kisses that were an insult to a woman's soul. Paying no heed to her moans of pain, forgetful of aught save his desire for her, he overbore her terrified struggles. His clutching hand pulled at the ribbons over her shoulders so that they broke, knocked against the hanging switch and mechanically pressed it.

In the darkness he struggled up, gathered her closer, muttering, whispering hot words. . . .

And with the light was extinguished the illusion of a girl's perfect trust. With the darkness fell the pedestals of idealism. Overbearing the agonies of physical pain, a horror of this monster with foul designs, clothed in human form, caused her senses to swim.

He felt the struggling form relax, hang inert, a dead weight.

A shaft of light from his room fell on the white face and closed eyes.

With a cry he became suddenly rigid. For a moment he looked wildly around. Then he staggered back to the bed with his burden, and fell again on his knees.

The shaft of light pierced the darkness, illuminating both their heads. . . .

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

THE rain poured down ceaselessly, in the way it loves to do in London on a summer day. Several weeks of blazing sun had sent everybody rushing about after extra thin clothing. Directly bank balances were thus lowered, the sprite in charge of the water-taps ran and turned them full on. Simultaneously his brother pulled all the wind wires. Umbrellas turned inside out; mackintoshes flapped into wet faces; smoke descended in gusts down chimneys and into streets. The water ran along the sides of Elizabeth Road, Kensington, forming narrow rivulets under the curb.

Elizabeth Road is one of those typical Kensington thoroughfares bordered by gray houses exactly alike, each possessing a bow window, a flight of steps leading up to the front door, another flight leading down to an area. About half-way it turns abruptly, continuing at right angles to its beginning.

At No. 12, near this corner, Mrs. Marten earned enough by letting rooms to provide a home for her three children until they could fend for themselves. At one time she had been housekeeper to the aunt with whom Leo's holidays were often spent. There she met her husband, who was a gardener, and who had been killed in the first year of the war.

She stood now, a homely woman in cream flannel blouse and black alpaca skirt, by the window of the front downstairs sitting-room. Her gray hair was brushed straight back from a lined pleasant face with kindly blue eyes. In

the bedroom beyond, separated by folding doors, her elder daughter Kitty, aged fourteen, was coaxing a fire.

"Miss Leo likes a fire in 'er room, when the skies are dreary," remarked her mother. "She always wants things bright——"

A taxi swinging round the corner cut short her words. She hurried out of the room and down the steps, regardless of rain. Before the driver could descend from his seat, she had the nearest door open.

"Hello, Marty! You'll get wet."

The voice was Leo's, but strangely lacking in buoyancy. Mrs. Marten, repressing a start at the pallor of the girl's face, thrust her strong arms into the taxi and half-lifted the bandaged figure to the ground. Leo glanced at a shapeless lump encased in a kind of woolen boot, and forced a laugh.

"Might have been a cinema stunt; mightn't it?"

"Miss Leo! 'Owever did you get here?"

"Only the devil knows—and this driver." She rested an arm on the shoulder he proffered, and bestowed the smile that had transformed his surliness to gallantry at Victoria Station.

Once in the sitting-room, she sank upon the sofa. "Marty, old dear, it's good to see you again." Her voice trembled suspiciously. Fumbling in her hand-bag she drew out her purse. "Pay the driver. Give him a huge tip. He enjoys his mug of beer—I smelled it. . . ."

"But your luggage?" expostulated Marty. "This isn't *all?*"

Leo nodded wearily at the suit-case the man had deposited in the passage. "The rest will come to—to Victoria Station. I wired for it." Her head sank back on the cushion. "I'm so tired . . . so tired. . . ."

Mrs. Marten was one of those rare women who don't ask superfluous questions, but act instead. She departed on her

errand. With a sigh of mingled weariness and relief, Leo glanced round the clean homely room with its white paint and blue curtains. So that inferno was over at last!—that terror-stricken flight across France and the Channel. She was safe. She had escaped. . . .

"No," she said decisively, a little later, "I can't face a doctor now. To-morrow . . . you can do all that can be done, Marty. I saw a doctor in Switzerland."

Mrs. Marten helped her to bed; then redressed and bandaged her injuries. Once alone for the night, the revolutions of the girl's distorted mind began afresh, accompanied by gusts of wind and rain that accentuated her dreariness of spirit. For two nights now she had not slept. For two nights and days her mind, bordering on fever, had revolved round one topic until its proportions had become gigantic. Dragging her thoughts away, she retraced her journey, wondering now over its accomplishment in such a helpless state. The strength born of desperation had been hers. It fell away now, no longer required, leaving her exhausted.

A waiter bringing coffee and rolls had roused her from a stupor of horror yesterday morning. On the tray lay a note—

"I am going out alone to think. Then let me see you, Leo, to explain. I will explain.—Val."

With a gasp of relief she dared to look once more at that communicating door. An unnatural coolness of thought, fostered by fear, caused her to ring for the waiter. A brief catechism confirmed her frail hope. The mountain train from Lauterbrunnen, on the other line up to the Pass, would arrive almost immediately and descend again. The line to Grindelwald was still blocked by the avalanche; but it was easy to reach Grindelwald *via* Lauterbrunnen. . . . Val would do that.

Leo ordered the Swiss woman to be fetched. To the consternation of everybody, she insisted upon being helped down to the train and placed within it.

"Tell my—the—*Monsieur,* when he returns, to follow—back to Grindelwald," she said, proud of this strategy. It would give her several hours' start. Until the little train began the descent she sat in a fever of dread, lest he should come back too soon. To her distorted mind he had assumed the aspect of a vampire. She dared not look upon the face that had seemed so beautiful. She dared not again meet the eyes she had seen so distorted. The very thought of him filled her with terror.

Kindly Swiss porters helped her out of the mountain train at Lauterbrunnen into one bound for Interlaken. There she was driven straight to the office of Messrs. Thomas Cooke. With the utmost despatch those officials took the matter into their capable hands. While connections were worked out and her seat was reserved along the route to London, she drove to the nearest doctor. While he attended to her injuries and vetoed her proposed journey, she gazed at his clock. Had Val discovered her deception yet? Could he get here before the train left for Basle? . . .

At last she was once more moving out beside the waters of Lake Thun. Across their shining expanse she saw the little hotel half hidden among the trees . . . saw the meadows where Val had sung the night they arrived . . . saw the pine woods behind, where they had wandered. . . .

With every vibration of the engine her face grew harder under the bitterness of disillusion—a wound more difficult to cure than any caused to the flesh.

Val had called her "an infant in some ways." To a certain extent this was true. It was owing in part to lack of all struggles for existence, in part to an irresponsible temperament. The mind of a young idealist refuses to recognize

sordid facts; it does not pause to adjust, or to search for the beauty it can not see. War tragedies had echoed round Leo: none had touched her acutely, herself. She was fastidious, and this fastidiousness held her unconsciously aloof both from people and actions she failed to understand. Though her friends of both sexes had been many, she had grappled few save Val very close, because few satisfied, as he had done, her strange spiritual craving and, simultaneously, her zest for material enjoyment. As he had poignantly realized, this was the sexless love of comrade for comrade; of one artistic spirit incapable of expression for another that is capable.

Val's reciprocation had been true enough in Army days. The possibility of a stray seed taking root and, thwarted, growing into a treacherous weed, never entered her mind. Val, her trusted friend, had failed. The pedestal, raised to such dizzy heights, had crashed into the mud. Val with the voice of an angel had become a thing loathsome. The ideals he embodied, to which her own were so closely linked, had been hypocrisy. . . .

With his fall some part of herself seemed to have fallen too. Other pedestals of illusions, leaning against this central one, toppled over, one after another. A terrible loneliness of spirit caused her to suffer in body and soul during the weeks of forced inaction after her return. . . . None of her former companions owned a place in her present scheme of things. They belonged to the old world of games, of art, of banter. They had not been dragged down into contact with elemental, sordid passions. . . .

Unconsciously a big step had been taken in her development: the step from inconsequent girlhood into a woman's heritage. It was deep and craggy. She had stumbled over it too suddenly. The step, however, could never be retraced.

"I wish you would fetch my things from the hotel,

Marty," she said one day. "Those I left there when I went to Switzerland. My books and music are there, and probably letters. Ask for others to be forwarded here."

Mrs. Marten, relieved by this renewed interest in life, departed forthwith. She returned with the luggage, a few letters, and a bulky, badly-packed parcel.

Leo took the letters listlessly. One was in Susie's writing; she appeared to be getting alarmed. Why had Leo not written? Surely she was back in London? Sam had exchanged a living with a man in Kent for a month, near the sea. They were coming to London from Willerton, *en route,* for a night. Wasn't it all lovely—this holiday? Could Leo meet them? . . . The letter rambled on about parochial affairs and Sam's perfections. At the end was a postscript: "We are going to have a baby! Isn't God good?"

Leo laid down the letter, frowning. The postscript seemed to bring close again the myterious, dark side of what people termed Love. It was the result of a man's passion. . . . But Susie, at the mercy of things elemental, might prove a confidante. Leo felt a growing need to ease her heart of some of its burden. She glanced at the date of the letter. To-morrow the Murrays were coming up. There would be just time to write.

She turned to the parcel on the table and started violently, for the address was in Val's familiar scrawl. The paper bore no stamps or post-mark. Evidently he had left it himself. He had followed her to England.

For several minutes she lay back on the sofa, the old fear closing around her. Then abruptly she pulled off the string. Two pairs of shoes fell out—those he had packed among his own things. A single sheet of hotel paper fell with them. She picked it up nervously, as though it were a burning coal.

"Leo—where are you? I've hunted high and low. For God's sake write. There's time to catch my boat at Marseilles if this reaches you. I can never forgive myself. I can't bear this silence. *Write.*—Val."

The passionate cry, the desperation of self-torture, failed to pierce the bitterness he had produced. The passion in the words seemed but the echo of the other passion she could not contemplate without a shudder.

Crumpling up the letter, she leaned forward and dropped it into the fire. Then she took out a pocket diary and studied the dates, and the little book fell suddenly to the ground. To-day was the date of his departure from Marseilles. . . Had she wished, it was too late to reach him now. He had gone to South Africa. . . . He had gone from her life.

The fear of being discovered in her retreat, of having to endure more horrors, existed no longer. She looked down at the blackening paper, at the flames licking it round. Soon that, too, would be as if it had never existed.

Black and gray now, the paper twirled in the flame that had scorched, paused a moment, then disappeared in smoke up the chimney. Was that symbolic, she wondered, with unaccustomed cynicism? Was friendship merely smoke? Was the love she had thought the real only possible at a distance? Did it either fade away or, if brought closer, burn itself out in passion, leaving but smoke?

A gusty summer day sent a tattoo of rain beating upon the window. In the road, a woman's voice began to sing, and the sound brought back an echo of her old rapturous illusions—scattered now like a house of cards at her feet. She turned, catching sight of the shoes Val had sent—and a flood of memories welled up in her heart. Great tears rose, splashed down her cheeks. She buried her head in the cushions, and—for the first time since that night of fear—wept bitterly.

CHAPTER II

FOR no outward reason friendship often eludes one when most needed. Leo found confidential talk with Susie an impossibility. Susie's conventionality had been shocked. Though full of sympathy over Leo's injuries, she treated the last weeks as something taboo. The ghost of a dead illusion hovered near the girl's elbow, demanding loyalty: she could not bring herself to break the taboo. Susie asked no questions; Leo vouchsafed no information. Nevertheless, Susie, feeling the subtle change in one whose joy in life often bordered upon hyperbole, wondered in her heart. Leo's conversation sounded forced, her laugh unnatural. There fell unusual silences, which Susie was usually left to break.

"What shall you do, when your foot is better?" she asked after one of these.

"Don't know. Stay in London, probably, until the autumn; then pay some country visits. But—I don't know," she repeated in the tone of one bored with the subject. Pushing a plate of cake across the table she glanced at her visitor with a mixture of compassion and amusement. "And—what about Sam II? Or will it be Susie II? When does it arrive?"

Susan blushed. "In February. Sam wants a boy. So of course I hope it will be one."

Leo ate bread and butter, and watched her visitor with eyes that narrowed. "Haven't you any wishes of your own—on the subject?"

"Oh, well—I *should* rather like a little girl, but—" She broke off and looked at her friend with a shy smile. "Isn't it all simply—*wonderful?*"

"Merely natural, I suppose."

Susan went on hurriedly with her tea, abashed by this lack of enthusiasm. Leo drummed absent-mindedly on the table with impatient fingers, subtle seeds of sex-warfare germinating in her heart. The yearning for motherhood, supposed to be an instinct in woman, seemed to her merely the sickly imagination of a certain type of man.

To hide her sense of hurt, Susan fell back upon the superiority of a conventional young matron.

"If you were married, Leo, dear, you would think differently. You would view many things differently. You need—need— 'anchoring.' "

" 'Anchoring'?" Leo laughed. "Why?"

Susan waxed yet bolder. "It's not safe for you to wander about alone in the way you do. Your ideas are too Bohemian; and—well, you know—you are rather attractive. Even Sam thinks so, and he doesn't usually notice women."

"I am indeed honored!"

"I'm not joking, Leo."

"Have you and Sam been discussing me?"

"Oh! I haven't said a word about—about——" Susie broke off in confusion; then continued hurriedly: "Naturally we talk about you. Sam thinks your nature has great possibilities if——"

"If what?" Leo's face was partly shaded by the hand lighting her cigarette; but Susie fancied a gleam of laughter in the eyes that met her own. She branched off the topic. "And Henry Wallis talks about you whenever we see him——"

"Henry Wallis?" For the first time a look of real interest crossed the girl's face.

Susan nodded.

"He traveled up with us this morning, and I gave him your address. He thought, if you couldn't walk, you might like some drives. I promised to ask you and let him know."

Leo threw her match into the grate.

"Then phone him directly you get near one, my good Su! Tell him to come as soon as possible. And remind him of his promise to let me try his new model. And tell him——" A ring at the front-door bell sent Susie, who sat facing the window, to her feet.

"It's Sam! Oh, isn't it sweet of him to fetch me? After attending a meeting, too!"

The Reverend Samuel Murray entered the room with his usual air of terrific importance. He was short and florid—"such a healthy color," Susie thought fondly. His mouth was good-natured. But his dark protruding eyes and consequential demeanor cried confidently: "I am a Man—ergo, King of all creatures. This woman has been chosen by Me to be the keeper of My house, the mother of My children, the provider of My comfort. All honor therefore is hers." He believed in large families and "Low" Church. Ritual was, to him, anathema; music a harmless adjunct to hymns. Fortunately, Susie loved to be possessed; to minister instead of being ministered unto. The idea of equality still savored of sacrilege to her, as to most inhabitants of Willerton.

With a few polite inquiries he shook hands with the member of the female species whose nature held possibilities.

"No, thanks, I won't have tea. I had it after the meeting. I'm afraid I have come to cut short Susie's little gossip."

"Why?" demanded Leo, in a manner that caused him some irritation.

The Reverend Sam liked a "womanly woman"; that is to say, one who acquiesced in his decrees without questioning them. Patting his wife's shoulder with possessive fondness, he smiled mysteriously.

"Just a little surprise!"

"Oh, Sam—what?" Susie clasped his hand.

"I'm taking you to the theater." He was one of those men who always "take" their wives about. They never "went together."

"Sam!" She glanced at Leo in pride, mixed with defiance.

Mr. Murray did not disapprove of theaters, but they bored him unutterably. However, Susie enjoyed such things. Therefore, when the cost was nil, Susie must have a treat. The Reverend Sam had been often told he was a model husband. . . .

"Canon Barton gave me the tickets," he explained, rather spoiling the effect for the audience. "He was summoned back to his parish, and of course his wife went with him."

"What's the play?" Leo asked, noting silently the "of course."

He wrinkled his brows. "Really— I forget the title. A pretty little thing, Barton said—quite fit to take one's wife to. I'm told a good many plays are not, nowadays. These things are not in my line, you know." He smiled indulgently at the two girls whose interest in "these things" he was humoring.

"Isn't it sweet of him, when he doesn't care for theaters?" Susie appealed, drawing on her gloves.

Her husband beamed gently at this echo of his own mind.

"Come along, dear," he urged, "or we shall have to hurry over our dinner."

Leo longed to ask if dinner were one of the things in his line; but she curbed the sarcasm, wondering at its gain over her sense of humor. This is one of the bogs hidden by disillusion, which resembles a damp fog creeping up and up, blotting out one familiar bit of landscape after another. It soaks gradually through every pore until one is chilled to the bone. If a lantern, or even a tiny torch, shine through the fog to distract attention, just a little glow of warmth permeates the cold—a point of focus is given.

This message from Henry Wallis focussed Leo's chilly revolutions in the fog of her thoughts. At their only meeting in the spring, she had been subtly attracted—yet it was an attraction she could not locate. He had been merely pleasant in a quiet, unostentatious way: even a little old-fashioned in his courtesies and views. But behind a reserve composed largely, she fancied, of shyness, there lurked that undeniable quality called grit.

Attractive companionship, fresh air whistling around to counteract the fog, the old familiar hum of a car, beckoned to Leo with the warming glow of a lantern. She felt a little less chilled.

During her solitary tea, a few days later, a small car drew up beneath the window, and Wallis ascended the steps with the quiet deliberation that characterized all his movements. He was of moderate height, appearing taller by means of a wiry thin figure and rather broad shoulders that stooped a little. Although his skin was clear, even healthily tanned, certain tired lines round his eyes betrayed a constitution not fundamentally strong—undermined probably by a youth spent in factories.

Leo's outstretched hand held such frank, glad welcome that the color deepened in his cheeks. Henry Wallis had not possessed a woman friend in his life. He belonged to the class and type that seldom understand such a possibil-

ity. This visit to a girl alone in lodgings was an event so tremendous that it proved embarrassing, and the embarrassment showed clearly in his face and manner.

"You must have tea, even if you have already had a dozen cups," she protested, when, hesitatingly, he refused. "It will save me from indigestion." Her quick smile—that of comrade to comrade—banished his diffidence.

"Just one cup, to prevent that calamity. Then—won't you come for a drive?" he asked, sitting down facing her and covertly noting the glitter of her hair where a shaft of light caught a few strands.

Leo left him in no doubt over that matter. Under cover of his solicitations and unfeigned interest in her accident, she also watched him. She was conscious again of his subtle attraction—that indefinable, wraith-like thing that hovers about some people, be they plain to ugliness. Wallis was by no means ugly. Plain possibly; yet, in a way, good-looking. His features were regular, if too unemotionally cold; his dark brown hair, short and smooth, was brushed across a broad brow in which two horizontal lines quickly formed upon any provocation. A small mustache partly revealed well-cut lips of uncompromising rigidity; the lines round their corners expressed dogged determination and, possibly, impatience—even irritability. His light gray eyes met her own with a peculiarly shrewd intentness.

No greater antithesis to Richard Valyran's vivid moodiness, long graceful limbs, and singular beauty could have been imagined. Perhaps, in the circumstances, the additional attraction Leo found in this man's company to-day was thus accounted for. He stood outside the fog. He represented the world of material, solid, pleasant things. During their brief meal together, that part of her nature which responded to these realities found ample satisfaction.

Wallis found himself discussing the latest inventions

in brakes, engines, axles. His shyness merged into wonder and admiration. A woman who shared these interests was, to him, unique. Unique, too, her air of independence with its mixture of youth and self-confidence. Many nets had been spread for Wallis since his appearance in provincial social circles: conventional nets—suitable nets—singularly unattractive nets. . . . With the painful anxiety of the climber to acquire the conventions of social orthodoxy, it was yet the glamour of the unconventional that formed the net in which his feet had at last become entangled. He thought Leo wonderful. And he said so, after drawing out an account of her work in the war.

She laughed. "Fiddlesticks! My bit was but the kick of a flea."

He laughed too—the quiet rare laugh that was rather good to hear.

"The kick of a flea goes a long way," he suggested.

"Oh, a damned long way!" she agreed frankly.

Such remarks upon the refined feminine lips in his usual circles would have sounded vulgar. Short red hair, too, would have seemed "fast." Yet, with this girl, nothing jarred. While she put on her hat, he reflected upon this matter; also upon a correct adjective to describe adequately the waving glory of that short—certainly not *red*—hair.

He took her arm to help her down the steps, and the clasp of his capable firm hand seemed subtly to chase away some of the girl's fog. Something in his eyes at the moment of contact chased away a little more. . . .

"We will go to Richmond," he remarked with concise brevity, outlining a route likely to bring them decorously back within a few hours. Momentarily, the difference flashed across Leo between this decision and Val's old joy in vagueness, his habit of eliminating names, technicalities, "tags." That had the charm of inconsequence; this, the

equal charm of resolution. She glanced at the man's profile, as he steered through the traffic. Resolution lurked in every line. It formed, she surmised, the keynote to his character. The look he had given her on the door-step had subtly softened and transformed the rigid lines of his face. For a moment another man had shown. She felt a strange curiosity to see that other man again.

"Haven't *you* any war stories?" she asked abruptly. "Any adventures? Or wounds——"

"No. Nothing."

The words were rapped out with unexpected severity, as if correcting impertinence. Abashed, she fell silent. Usually he spoke slowly, carefully, each word seeming to be deliberately chosen. Since the days when Henry Wallis took his dinners in a big red handkerchief to the factory, years of training had produced this careful enunciation—the correct word, its right pronunciation, the omission or inclusion of *h's* and *g's*—until now the habit held a certain attraction. Similarly with clothes—another pitfall in an ever-rising position. To a super-critical eye he appeared sometimes a little—just a little—too well-dressed. Everything was too obviously thought out—"for the part"—too correct.

Leo's eyes, however, were not super-critical over externals. What they admired was enterprise—the enterprise that had achieved in spite of all obstacles. She felt drawn, also, to his wholesome safe solidity. That other part of her nature, inextricably entwined with Valyran, seemed not merely lost with him, but dead.

This evening proved the first of a succession similarly spent. Each one dispersed more of Leo's fog. She grew to rely on the companionship they brought; to pass the days in anticipation. . . .

By the end of a week Wallis had learned many details

about the girl: details which helped him to make, with his usual deliberation, one of the big decisions of his career. Leo's father had been a naval officer, a scion of a titled family; her mother, the daughter of an eminent artist, and no mean artist herself. Such knowledge appealed to the man who had fought his way up, as it can appeal to no other. All these relatives being dead, the solitariness of her position held another appeal—that to the chivalry and, possibly, the romance, tucked away somewhere in his being. Her preference for freedom to life among distant relatives for whom she had little affection, fired his admiration still higher. A man whose fame is that of a millionaire does not often meet this spirit in the people who come his way.

"But aren't you lonely?" he asked one evening, slowing down the car and turning to look at her with the softened light she had come to expect in his eyes.

She laughed, flushing. "No! Of course not. I'm not always glued to rooms with my foot like a sausage. There is too much to be done and enjoyed in the world, for loneliness. Don't you think so?"

He hesitated, turning back to the wheel. "I don't know. My life has been a struggling one, of continually changing circumstances. It has, I confess, been lonely. The friends of one phase got lost in the next. So that it has been full of strangers. You have not experienced that."

"I don't see why it need be," she remarked, puzzled. The democratic freedom of her nature knew none of the subtle difficulties of those who climb. "I never lost my old friends if circumstances changed."

"But yours have not changed in the way mine have," he protested quickly. "Your foundations were always in the same soil, however much your surface circumstances changed. I am what is called a self-made man. My foundations have been uprooted—over and over again."

Leo's eyes kindled. His unaffected simplicity appealed to her own sincerity. Susan Murray's allusion to a gulf that can never be bridged in this generation recurred to her mind, to be dismissed as absurd. No gulf showed between this man and herself. "I think people make too much of silly, external things," she said decisively. "You—your enterprise—why, it should bring you more and more friends, new and old. I—I think it's splendid!"

He laughed, with another quick look into her face.

"A certain type of friend hangs on every bush in the pathway of success. You are, I see, rather an idealist; and —if you'll forgive my saying so—most refreshingly young!"

His words raised a memory that chased away some of the light from her face. "This is the second time lately that my excessive youth has been commented upon," she observed. "Yet—consider the free life I have led—my war experiences——"

"Surface ones again," he interrupted. "One may travel over the globe—have a hundred experiences—yet never know what life is, without coming to grips with some of the big facts."

Leo bit her lip, looking away over the fields with eyes that saw only a mountain fastness covered in snow. "You are right," she murmured. "But—they are so—so *hideous.*"

Something in her tone caused him to turn to her again, with a little indulgent smile. "That doesn't prevent their existence, unfortunately. This is not a dream-world. It is one of ugly hard facts. And disguising the knowledge won't erase it. Ideals are all right for dreamers, but they won't hold."

"Oh!" Leo looked up at him anxiously. "Don't you think so? Can't they and the facts possibly be—be adjusted —in some way——"

He gave a little shrug, and guided the car past a truck, before replying. "I don't believe in compromise. Face what is, and turn it to your advantage. That's the way to succeed. Now, what about trying the new model? If your foot is well enough?"

"Quite. I can wear a soft shoe."

"Will you come to Hindhead on Saturday? We can go in time for lunch, and have a—a long day."

This was the first time Henry Wallis had suggested a whole day's outing with a woman. An unusual excitement caused the color to mount in his face.

And another great cloud of fog rolled away from Leo's mind. The lantern was growing very bright now, its focus more sure. The color dyed her cheeks too, when she replied. . . .

CHAPTER III

SATURDAY dawned in a foggy drizzle, which grew gradually clear, merging at last into a morning of warm sunshine. The dust having been thus laid, the countryside looked unusually fresh and green. The sky was vividly clear, as if, during its early disappearance in mist, each cloud had been washed and replaced in unusual prominence. Against them the dark tops of the Surrey pines were sharply silhouetted. The heather on the commons glowed, a purple carpet, intersected by white ribbons of sandy paths. Here and there clumps of gorse glittered, though their early riot of bloom was over.

The new model of touring car took the long steep hills without a murmur, soaring up under Leo's sure touch with the light ease of a bird. Wallis sat silent, watching with furtive admiration her glowing face.

Appreciation effects more within a few hours than weeks of advice, counsel or repression. Wallis and Leo each felt the other's appreciation flowing around, a warm tide; therefore the spirits of both rose higher with each throb of the engine.

When London was left behind, Leo whisked off her fawn suède hat and flung it into his hands. "Why don't you do the same?" she asked, shaking her hair free in the wind.

He hesitated. To drive without a hat in the neighborhood of Willerton, where he lived, would be thought—well —rather—— It was not done, in fact—except by young

men nobody knew socially, who were considered "common." Glancing at Leo, he reflected again, that, in spite of unconventionality, nothing jarred. Without the odious "made to match" impression her clothes toned harmoniously, as if, like wild flowers in a meadow, all the soft fawns and creams and browns had grown together. Even the oriental soft slipper on one foot did not appear incongruous beside the other's buckskin brogue.

Quite suddenly Wallis pulled off his hat and thrust it into a corner; but Leo's he still held in his hands.

She turned to him with a smile in which some of her old ecstasy lurked, causing her eyes to glow.

"Isn't this *jolly?*"

"Yes. Rather!"

His coat-sleeve pressed a little closer on her arm. She though how much she liked the *feel* of it. . . . She spoke hurriedly:

"I've been in the blues since——"

"Your accident? I don't wonder. It's lonely for you. Couldn't you have friends to stay——"

"I don't want them."

Catching his glance of surprise, she continued: "I—I've been feeling rather sick about—friends." There was sympathy in the pressure of his arm. Some craving for an outlet forced her on: "The friend who was with me in Switzerland behaved—behaved—rottenly, after the avalanche."

"Did she? Indeed?" He glanced at the set lines of her profile. In his upward career, the problem of betrayed friendship had not been lacking.

"It's painful to be deceived in a friend. I know."

"Do you? What—what did you do?"

"I? Oh—I put him out of my life. It taught me one of those horrible facts you dislike facing."

"What was that?"

"Human frailty. The less one expects of anybody, and the less one depends upon anybody, the happier and more successful one becomes."

She pondered over this in silence. "That seems a pity," she remarked at last.

He smiled. "Do you think so? In shaping your life you must keep free—be self-reliant. If you allow outside people or circumstances to count, you will never succeed."

Leo puckered her forehead, and slowly shook her head. "I don't think I agree. We are each only a bit of a whole. We can't, therefore, ride roughshod, individually. We have to alter things, to readjust things, to *fit in* with the whole——"

"Idealism again!" he interrupted, with another laugh. "I'm afraid you will get terrible bumps sometime."

She bent over the steering wheel, remembering Val's similar remark.

"Perhaps I've had some already," she muttered.

The arm close to hers pressed it yet more, as he leaned a little forward to look into her face.

"Forget them," he urged, a new note in his voice. "If an ideal has proved valueless, throw it away and substitute something real."

Leo glanced for a moment into the light-gray eyes close to her own. A wonderfully attractive smile softened their usual hardness, and a strange little tremor ran down the arm he pressed; ran right into her fingers, so the car swerved suddenly. Neither quite realized what subtle meaning lay in the look that passed between them. But when she slowed down the car and sat back, they felt a new sense of nearness—yet not of friendship.

The Devil's Punch Bowl was revealing itself in ever-lengthening, ever-widening expanse as they followed the

road bordering its brim to Hindhead. Overhead sailed great masses of cloud, their shadows chasing each other across the wide valley below. While the southeast of the Bowl blazed purple, russet and gold in the sun, the west brooded gray-blue or almost black in shadow. These shadows slowly rolled up and away as if a dust-sheet were being removed, leaving bright stretches of sunlight in its trail—until once more a big cloud spread the dust-sheet again, and the distance was shrouded in gray.

Leo stopped the car and leaned over the side to watch the changing moods of the valley. "Isn't it wonderful?" she murmured, half to herself. "Look at the sunlight on that patch of heather—down there——"

As her companion leaned across to see, she felt the pressure of his arm again—this time behind her shoulders. Another strange little tremor ran down her frame. She turned back with heightened color, but this time she did not meet his eyes.

"C-can we get out here? I want to go down into it—to be *of* it. Can't we have lunch there—on that big patch of heather, with the gorse twinkling beside it?"

Abruptly her hurried words ceased. For the arm lay still around her shoulders, and he did not move. For some mad, unknown reason, every pulse in her body seemed to throb, so that she thought he must hear their hammering. She half rose. "Out," she muttered; "l-let's get out——"

Without a word, he removed his arm and opened the door. As he helped her to alight another glance passed between them; a kind of magnetic cable flung from one to the other binding them closer with every charged strand. Leo was acutely conscious of the touch of his hands on hers, the strength of his arm within her arm until they reached the heather. Possibly the unemotionalism of his face and manner, his immediate withdrawal when she ceased to need

his help, strengthened this consciousness. Though her hand, arm, even her lips had been offered to Valyran with disarming freedom, she could not have advanced a finger to Wallis of her own accord.

He left her on the heather and returned to the car for the luncheon basket. A picnic had been Leo's whim. He would have taken her to one of the palatial hotels that have done their best to tame the wild beauty of the hills and heather into a center of bedressed high-heeled fashion.

She filled her hands, rather hurriedly, with the purple sprigs within reach, while watching his movements. A new excitement was coursing through her veins. Vastly different from the old, half-mystical ecstasy, it seemed partly composed of fear, partly of a restless craving for—something: she did not know what. His matter-of-fact tone, when at last he returned, was almost in the nature of a chill.

"It is a pity," he observed casually, setting down the basket and unfastening the straps, "that so much of Surrey is practically useless—waste, like this."

Leo stopped plucking heather, and gazed up at him in amazement.

"But—it is so beautiful! Surely it's not waste to be beautiful?"

His quick glance at her face answered the question and brought the flush no other man had caused. He smiled a little. "Wouldn't it be more beautiful if it were of use? Empty beauty is a waste of commodity."

"I don't agree," she protested, for the second time to-day. These diverse points of view were both interesting and stimulating. She leaned forward, clasping her hands round her knees. "Beauty is not just a tangible 'commodity.' It is elusive—spiritual. Who can define it? Something——" Conscious again of his indulgent smile, she broke off. He held up a plate of old Worcester ware.

"Do you call that beautiful?"

"Why do you bring such perfectly exquisite china to a picnic?" she cried, taking the plate from him.

"Why not? The things are for use, not ornament. But isn't that china more genuinely beautiful because it contributes something to the world, than if it were vaguely 'elusive,' 'spiritual'—what only poets can sing about?"

"No. That doesn't make it any more beautiful to me. Its beauty is—is—just in being *itself*. Like that silver cloud over there, with a rim of gold, and a cobalt curtain behind—— Oh, you are laughing again!"

"I hope you will like this salad," he remarked, not looking up from his unpacking.

Whereupon Leo threw back her head and broke into a peal of laughter, herself. It was all very novel, very jolly, very amusing—these diverse points of view!

"What a sumptuous lunch!" she cried, taking the plate of chicken he offered. "Even—yea verily! Even champagne! I have never picnicked in such lavish style before. Makes me feel like a bally millionaire. Oh! I—I beg your pardon. I believe—I'm . . ." Refusing to meet the renewed laughter in his eyes, she lowered her hot face over her glass of champagne. "Tell me," she began again—"I like these discussions with you. Tell me—don't you care for poets—poetry, I mean? Or music? Or drama? Literature?"

He shook his head. "I have had no time in my life for such things."

"'Such things'? 'No time'? Why?'"

"Hard work. My father was only a—a carpenter. There were five of us, and my mother died when we were children. It was a hard struggle."

Leo turned toward him, a glow of admiration in her eyes. "What are the other four doing? and were they all brothers?"

"None is alive now. Two brothers were killed in the war. I had one sister——" He broke off abruptly. Then, responding to the inquiry in her intent gaze, he went on hurriedly. "She—she made rather a hash of her life. She became infatuated with an actor at a music-hall and ran away with him. It was a terrible blow to us all. The man was married, you see."

His words went into silence. Leo's glass tilted over, upsetting some of the champagne. He leaned across to take it from her, and wondered momentarily at the pain in her eyes.

"What happened?"

"Oh—he tired of her, and went off with another woman. Ethel—my sister—wanted to come home. But my father wouldn't allow that. He was a severely upright man. She had chosen a life of sin, he said, and must take her punishment. She went to a home, and—and died, when her child was born."

Leo sat quite still, staring down the valley. "A severely upright man." The words rang in her ears. Birth—death—the result of passion! the punishment. . . .

"That set me against the stage," he concluded bitterly. "When actors shed their paint, they shed their honor too."

"Oh, no, no! Not all! Surely—I have known—oh, I don't know!" The bitterness in her own voice belied her first impulsive defense. He threw aside his plate rather contemptuously.

"I know they have a fascination for women, and that is what they trade upon, in the guise of friendship. Friendship? Fiddlesticks! It doesn't exist between men and women."

The girl glanced at him half-fearfully. His eyes were almost colorless in their hardness, the lines round his lips rigid almost to cruelty. He would not, she surmised, ever

take offense lightly. The old horror stole around her heart at his words. The fog gathered close again. She turned away with a shudder.

"Are you cold?" he asked at once, all the gentleness back in his voice.

"No. But—it—these things are so horrible. So *ugly*. I wonder if you are right?"

"About what?"

"What you said—friendship between men and women not existing. I used to think it did——"

He had risen to his feet and was standing behind her, so close that again all her pulses began their foolish hammering.

"Don't you think it does, now?"

At the touch of his hand on her shoulder she closed her eyes and bit her lip.

Receiving no answer, he bent down. "Don't you?"

She shook her head. "One of my—bumps," she murmured, trying to master her voice. Her nervous fingers crumbled bits of moss they discovered beside the heather. For a mad moment she longed to blurt out her pitiable story to this man whose touch was strangely magical. She beat down the absurd craving. His own words had proved that he would not understand. He bent lower and his hand closed over hers. Her resolve weakened, as her fingers seemed to weaken in his grasp. Her whole body would weaken, she fancied, were he to draw closer. . . . "I—I was once—badly deceived in—somebody I met during the war" —she was panting a little as he sat down at her side—"I trusted him. And he—he tried—he took advantage——" Shuddering again, she unconsciously clung to his hand, her fingers curling around his.

"I understand. Don't try to tell me any more."

The words brought a wondrous relief. For the first

time her mind felt eased of its burden. Yet the loyalty to an old, dead friendship, which had forbidden confidence with Susie, was in no way outraged. The gratitude and relief in the face she turned to him paled into wonderment at the transfiguration of his own. The cold eyes were dark and shining. . . .

"My dear . . ." he said. He caught her other hand, and pressed both against his cheek. . . .

Frightened by the weakness stealing over her limbs, she drew back; but his grasp tightened. He smiled reassuringly.

"Don't be scared. You—you know—don't you? I want you to know. If you will marry me—but you need make no decision yet."

The quiet words and tone calmed her fluttering senses. She met his eyes fully. In them lay no sickly signs of ungovernable passion. There was no weakness in his face. He looked strong, reliable, restful—an anchor. . . . The emphatic, frightened denial faded, unuttered, from her lips.

"How can you know?" she said, instead. "You can't know *me*—properly, yet."

"Can't I? Oh, I think I can."

A smile whose tenderness no other had seen, again softened his lips. "I have never loved a girl before, and I never shall again."

"And—you——"

"I love you."

Speech failed Leo. There was something in this man's quiet simplicity too big to be cast lightly aside.

"I—don't know what to say," she muttered at last. "I hadn't thought——"

"Don't say anything. Think first. Then—then tell me." He looked down at the hands he held. "There's only one thing I want to say, however."

He looked up again, full into her eyes. "You have had a shock. It has gone deep, I can see. . . . Well . . . don't let that frighten you. I—I am not one of the passionate sort who—— You know what I mean? I don't think I am likely to demand—more than you can give."

Her glance wavered from his, away to the horizon. "You would be content? with—just what I could give?"

"With what you could give," he repeated. Her head was still bent, and he went on with a change of tone: "As for other matters—you could have any blessed thing you wanted. I am—money is no object, if you understand——"

She turned to him with a little laugh. "I don't mind that. It's—*you!* Whether I could care enough, that counts."

"You are adorably frank!"

He opened his hands. As she made no attempt to draw her own away, he closed them again. "You don't mind my holding your hands?"

At once she tried to draw free. He gripped closer, and laughed, almost boyishly.

"You like it?"

Flushing scarlet, she laughed in her turn, as she met his look. "Perhaps. . . . At least, I mean——"

"I am more than content!" Loosing her, he rose to his feet, and stooped to help her up. "Shall we go on?" But, as she rose and, stiff from sitting, lurched a little toward him, his clasp of her arms tightened. For one intoxicating moment the valley seemed to fade with all the rest of the world as the girl felt herself drawn close.

"My dear!" he murmured again. "My dear!"

But he did not kiss her. Nor did he again refer to the subject during their long afternoon together. At her request he took the wheel, and she sat unusually silent, close at his side, enjoying the quiet unassuming dexterity of his

driving. With a little encouragement he told her more about his career; of the motor business he had entered; of his own small patents whose success had given him the chance to launch out for himself; of the nucleus which gradually evolved into the present huge enterprise of the Wallis-Milne Company.

Leo listened. And, with every quiet word, the pedestal of this man—erected in such different clay from that other pedestal which had fallen—grew higher and higher. . . .

Sometimes he, too, sat silent. For a very strange, new sidelight had been thrown upon his commercial life. The necessity of a wife to complete his career had been obvious for some time. She was to lay the crowning touch upon his success; to solidify his acquired social position—if possible, to raise it. For his needs, she must be well-bred, possess all social requisites, be capable of equipping his children for the position they could one day occupy, with his wealth, in ways in which he had never been equipped. Now—all his preconceived ideas of marriage as a duty to be accomplished "sometime" were changed! It had become the desire of his life. He scarcely thought of Leo's suitability for the post. If he had . . . But Henry Wallis was always thorough; and now he was thoroughly in love, as he viewed love. . . .

"We will go out again to-morrow. May I come to-morrow?" he asked, stooping to untuck the rug from her knees when they drew up in Elizabeth Road.

She nodded, because something in his look and touch again caught her breath.

"I like him—I like him—I like him!" cried her heart when he vanished round the corner. "He is so straight and reliable. . . . So—so—*real*. And"—she covered her face, which was suddenly hot—"I like the—feel of him so much. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

LEO was not given to self-analysis. Therefore the mystery of the strange restlessness that consumed her that Saturday night remained unsolved.

She limped about her two rooms; altered the position of chairs; tore up stray letters—for the first time in her life feeling actually bored. Books—music—all her chief interests fell flat. She was impatient, tired of her own company, yet not desirous of the company of others; only conscious of the queer restless craving for—*something,* that she could not fathom.

Human beings in their moth-like habit of flying from the flickering flare of one candle straight into the steady burning flame of another hope, maybe, to cure the scorch of the first. And perhaps the small wound is cured—lost in the consuming flame that draws them close by its very lack of endeavor, by its steady, unflickering light.

Leo, singed, scorched, by the passion—the sex—that she had not understood, could nevermore escape from its effects. They were subtle, insidious. They crept up as the flame creeps up the moth, waiting to burst into full and fiery glare. When the glare dies away, the original moth has often disappeared too. . . .

Leo's cheeks had never before burned upon meeting the look in a man's eyes. Never before had the touch of a man's hands caused the scene around to fade as if she were under the influence of some intoxication. . . .

She sank down on a chair by the open window, and

looked out into the dark night, her face hot once more over her reflections. A myriad stars shone in the sky, but she did not look at them. They seemed very far away, with all the heavens and the ethereal powers therein. She was dwelling in a world of plain, but singularly attractive facts. . . .

Wallis would be here at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Some day he would want a decisive answer: one which would mean all or nothing. With a simplicity and straightness she admired, he had offered her his love. He had not, under the guise of friendship, sought, like Val—— Another lane branched off, in her meditations, down which she traveled fearfully. Conscious of the fears lurking in her mind, a thought rose to her lips and was murmured aloud into the darkness: "He would be a safeguard."

A safeguard! Val would have to forget. . . . "Would it safeguard *you,* too? Against yourself?" Some far-off voice seemed to ask this question—a voice so tiny, so frail that the terrific significance of the words was lost in space. Their surface value alone reached her mind. "Yes," she breathed, without reflection.

And the spiritual self that had been cast out so ruthlessly—snubbed, subdued—lowered its head again, sighed, and slept. . . .

Other men who had wished to marry Leo had been despatched without consideration. She had never craved for the possession of a house, children, all the conventional requisites of the orthodox young matron. And marriage in itself made no appeal to her now—barely claimed a thought. She was only conscious of a tremendous need for Wallis. To turn him completely out of her life might prove almost impossible. Not merely as a safeguard did she feel this need. She wanted him near her. She wanted to feel again the touch of his hand, the pressure of his arm—— Another wave of color caused her to bury her face in her own arms.

A clock chimed the hour of two. She drew back from the window and, without turning on the light began hastily to undress. . . .

With characteristic exactness Wallis arrived next morning on the very stroke of ten. He noted silently the quick color that dyed the girl's face when she entered the room, the unusual manner in which her eyes were lowered from his. Holding out both hands, he pressed those surrendered to him.

"Come and try my pet model. I want your opinion."

Her momentary embarrassment fled. As he took her arm and helped her down the steps and into the car, all the restlessness of the past night fled too. Within the big gray model, with its beautiful lines and exquisite detail, lay peace, content, security. Conscious of his shoulder so near her ear, she settled down to the wheel and began a catechism upon the car's mechanical points. This was the world of material, pleasant, safe facts—*safe*. . . .

"I don't know why, but I feel as if I had escaped from—something," she remarked once. A sudden exhilaration, as if wine were running through every vein, caused her to open the throttle and press the accelerator; and his reply was lost in the wind.

They lunched at an inn subtly transformed into an hotel in the New Forest. Afterward they sat over their cigarettes in a little wooded glade. And with the suddenness of its coming, Leo's exhilaration departed. She was faced by the return to lonely lodgings. A vista of the future with its visits confronted her. The games, dancing, surface chatter of her friends appeared vapid; the music and other arts in which she had delighted, held out no beckoning hand. Her usual life seemed all at once horribly *unsatisfying*.

"When do you want to start back?" he broke the silence, stooping to shield a match from the breeze.

"Oh—not yet! The nights are so dull. Do you want to hurry back?"

"Not at all."

She raised her face for the cigarette to be lighted. There was magnetism in the air. He dropped the match and seized her fingers. The breath caught in her throat, and her face flushed, then paled, as she dragged her hand free, in unexpected panic. Without speaking he turned away, took a few steps down the path, then came and sat a little behind her.

"I have to leave London, sooner than I expected, for the Continent," he observed casually.

The horrible sensation of taking a step upward in a dark corridor where no step is provided, caused Leo to catch her breath again. The desolation flooding her heart and mind sounded in her voice.

"You will—come—back soon?"

"Not before September."

"I shall be away then." It seemed the natural thing to say. Their eyes met, clung for an instant, then each glanced away and fell silent.

Leo gazed down the woodland ride. With Val she would have filled in some medieval setting of knights and royal maidens. The scene was of the romantic kind that required the clank of armor to resound among the high trees, the glitter of shields and trappings of horses to catch the shafts of sunlight piercing the branches. But to-day her vision was of a drab London with streets extraordinarily empty, and probably rain pouring down. . . . Those subtle, dangerous sparks, ignited by another, were throwing up new and stronger flames moment by moment. . . . A mad overwhelming desire to give in to Wallis, to claim him and be claimed, caused her to struggle to her feet in another panic.

"Perhaps we ought to start," she said hurriedly; "it is—a long drive. Isn't it?"

Wallis was unused to the paradoxical moods of women. About five minutes ago Leo had shown a frank desire to prolong this day to its uttermost; now she urged an immediate return. He looked at her in bewilderment.

"Why this sudden hurry? There is time to finish our cigarettes."

With a self-conscious laugh, she sat down again, a few feet away from him, and plunged into vapid conversation by admiring the shape of a fir-tree. He agreed, and thought the color "very pretty—such a deep green." She speculated upon its height, and he damned the tree silently, to himself. He remarked upon the length of roots, and she cursed the entire forest, in her heart.

"Why is he so cold? He's gone into a shell. . . . This may be our last day together. . . . September . . ." ran her thoughts.

Conversation fizzled out entirely at last. With mutual relief allied to a hollow sense of disappointment, they rose to go. Leo cast a final look round their glade. Something big seemed to have been missed there. And yet—and yet—might she not see again that horrible passion distorting a man's face. . . .

"Will you drive back?" she asked impulsively.

"Certainly, if you wish."

His habitual reserve, added to an indefinite sense of strain, caused each to relapse into silence during the long drive. Leo felt lost in a confusion of emotion that she could not disentangle. Last night's restlessness stole round her mind and limbs with every throb of the engines which brought nearer the loneliness of her rooms. Every moment that passed in this unsatisfactory manner was one less before his departure from London, departure probably, from her life, unless . . . She had read the unspoken hint in his words. What was wrong, all at once, between them? What did

she want? Only one word and his barrier would be down; yet—surely this strange yearning restlessness could not be the Love of which she had heard so much? Love, she had declared, was spiritual. . . .

"I hope," she said stiffly, because she felt tumultuously self-conscious, eager and depressed, when they turned into Elizabeth Road, "I hope you will call again—before you leave London?"

"I'll try to come round one evening this week," he replied—indifferently, she thought.

He helped her up the steps in a detached manner, and refused her invitation to go in. From her sitting-room window she watched him enter the car and drive away. "Without one backward look!" she muttered. "He is cold . . . cold. . . . But—I like it."

Half-laughing at the confession, she turned toward the table, and her eyes dilated. For a marconigram lay there which, evidently, had been sent on from her old hotel.

She tore open the envelope, and her face flamed angrily.

"How *dare* he?" she cried aloud. "Oh, how dare he? He must be mad!" Crumpling the paper up into a ball, she gazed at it with furious, frightened eyes. "To send *that*—from a ship!" Impatiently she spread out the sheet again and reread Val's rash wild words—

"If no message on arrival I shall chuck everything and return. Can not endure this longer."

And he would carry out the threat! He would stop at nothing, in this mad mood. She knew his rashness of old; had exulted in many quixotic, wild exploits in Army days. And she knew now his head-long lack of balance. What devil possessed him, that he could not or would not understand her silence? To respect it was the only reparation he could offer.

She sank into a chair and covered her face with trembling hands. If she wrote, what could she say? Terrible words had been said on that night, after her reeling senses had revived. Neither could unsay those words, nor forget them. A cable would be necessary to meet his boat. What could she possibly put in a cable to crush this unbridled mania?

Mrs. Marten's steps sounded on the stairs. With quick resolve Leo thrust the paper into the grate and struck a match. That much at least she could do. But she watched it burn, her hands clasping and unclasping each other on her lap in impotent fear. "The fool!" she kept muttering. "The mad, idiotic fool! Where will he land himself and me—if—— How can I crush it all? make him forget——?"

"A safeguard."

From nowhere the words seemed to rise; to be writ in the little flame in the grate; to stretch along the mantel-shelf, when she looked up; to blaze in the light of the setting sun. . . . She sprang to her feet, and again covered her face and eyes. The new restlessness surged up, a tidal wave that beat over, through, around, all the chaotic thoughts that tumbled about in her mind. . . . Almost subconsciously she heard doors being opened and shut, voices—a Voice. Dropping her hands precipitately, she looked up; then uttered a choking cry.

Henry Wallis stood in the doorway.

He was gazing at her in astonishment. "You left your hand-bag in the car. I came back with it," he said, coming slowly forward. As she made no movement, save to clutch at a chair-back, he laid the bag on the table. "Is everything all right?" he asked uncertainly.

Her head nodded, but her eyes never left his face. They clung to him, with an appeal like that of a dumb animal caught in a hidden snare.

For a moment he met the appeal in silence, the pulses hammering in his own body. Then he took a few decided steps toward her and laid both hands on her shoulders. All the tenderness that had transfigured his face the day before shone there, as he bent over her.

"What is it? . . . what is it?"

She clutched her throat nervously, every fiber of her being seeming to weaken under the close clasp of his hands. Unconsciously she swayed toward him, and in a moment he had folded his arms about her. And in their sanctuary a wonderful peace unexpectedly descended on Leo. She drew her own arms free, and they crept up, around his shoulders.

"Don't leave me behind. . . . Don't let me go . . ." she whispered sobbingly.

"Never," he murmured, as his lips met hers. "Never. . . ."

CHAPTER V

THE world and the people therein seemed curiously unreal to Leo when she settled into her chair on the deck of the Channel steamer. That a short half-hour in an almost empty church could have transformed her into a married woman was surely incredible! As if to reassure herself, she pulled off her glove and studied the new gold ring on her finger. Then she glanced at the overcoat on the empty chair beside her own. With a tremulous smile and sigh, she laid her hand on the coat. It was the instinctive action of ownership. She possessed. And—she was possessed. The old bachelor freedom, though delightful, appeared pale in comparison with this wonderful feeling of possessiveness—this vista of perfect companionship. It was like entering a bright warm room after a day spent, albeit enjoyably, in keen frosty air.

The last fortnight had whirled by with preparations, visits from relatives, hurried purchases of clothes. Wallis, amazed but enraptured by her almost feverish anxiety to go abroad with him, had obtained a license and set all the tongues wagging around Willerton. He was the chief catch of the neighborhood. Consternation raged. Everybody felt the bride must be a designing person. Mrs. Bolten, the chief widow, murmured "Poor Henry Wallis," in the cooing voice she reserved for eligible men; and it became the keynote to local opinion.

The designing person, meanwhile, did not easily become accustomed to the novelty of possession. It had only grown

greater, taken new turnings, each day. There had been the evening when Wallis arrived with a tiny Yorkshire terrier puppy. "To keep you from being lonely until I can do so, myself," he had said, with one of his rare sly caresses. . . .

She lay back in her chair now, and reviewed with amusement the astonishment of her friends, the relief of her relations, Susie's letter. The last recollection caused her to laugh aloud. Such haste had seemed extraordinary to conventional Susie. "Couldn't Leo wait and test herself? Was she quite sure of her own mind? Did Mr. Wallis know about—*that man?* No; she could *not* understand Leo's heart! This was such a Big Step. . . . Sam sent a message to say he thought her a very lucky girl. He admired Mr. Wallis. . . ." This patronizing view of woman's side in matrimony was typical of the Reverend Sam, Leo reflected, laughing again.

Then her thoughts turned to the cable she had sent to South Africa a fortnight ago. Soon the newspaper with her marriage announcement would reach Val. He would not realize it had come about so suddenly. He would think —at any rate this would crush his mad infatuation. . . . Her glance, wandering idly over the deck, encountered that of a freckled-faced young man who was familiar for some reason. She quickly recognized him for her companion on the last crossing to Calais, and nodded, smiling at the coincidence. Then the smile broadened, grew more softly radiant, as Wallis appeared. He looked back in some surprise.

"Who is it? Do you know somebody here?"

"Oh, no. It's only a boy I talked to before—when I came across to Switzerland. I don't know him."

"Oh, come, come!" He smiled down possessively, as he put on his coat. "I can't have you chumming up with stray young men now—under my very nose, too!"

Just a hint of mastery in the teasing words, caused her a

brief flash of uneasiness. It came and went within a moment, so that she was barely aware of its occurrence.

"I always chum up easily," she replied, patting the arm of his chair. "We don't know each other's virtues and vices very well yet, do we? Let's sit down and confess them, so that we know what to expect when we land. Or should we never land?"

"Probably not," he laughed, entering into her mood. He sat down, and drew his chair close to hers. "We can spend our lives finding those out. D'you know I have scarcely had you to myself since—that Sunday night?"

The quick flush that he alone ever caused rose to her cheeks; but she chose to be flippant. "Since then we have only discussed carpets, time-tables, and wills. I suppose most couples would have spent the time ferreting out their pasts."

"Pasts?" He looked puzzled, as he tucked their rug round her knees.

"Past life, I mean. Oh, I'm not going to begin, so don't look startled! I don't think married people's pasts have anything to do with each other. It's—from when they get engaged that counts. Isn't it?"

"Well—really—I had never thought about the matter. My past is very ordinary. You are welcome to as much as you wish—at any rate. I'm keener on the future."

"My friend Susie—Mrs. Murray, you know—regards matrimony as a kind of confessional box. Every damson you have stolen from birth upward has to be confessed before the Service. Mustn't it be tedious? I should need a month, without pause for meals, to get through."

He laughed again, and sought for her hand under the rug. "One look into your eyes tells me all your past that I need to know," he said simply.

Her fingers returned his pressure; but she fell silent

watching the sea. A strong breeze was blowing, and the little white-capped waves danced merrily in the sunshine, as the boat plunged along. Something of the old ecstacy mingled with the warm thrill at her heart caused by his words and proximity. She leaned close to his arm. "Ah!" she murmured, a note in her voice he had not heard there before. "This is all very—beautiful. . . . Isn't it—Harry?" Her voice fell on the last word.

He bent over her, the new wonderful tenderness softening his eyes. "Nobody has ever called me that before."

"Then it is my own special name for you. I'm glad."

Wallis was not only reserved, he was in many ways a shy man. The thirty-eight years of his life had been passed outside the atmosphere of woman's love, after the early loss of his mother. Leo's sudden capitulation, her unfeigned delight in his company, her quick response to any affection, were so amazing as to render speech upon the subject impossible. It was all too great, too splendid, for mere words.

"I have not heard you call me by any name—yet," she said, after a pause, with the little shy glance that set his pulses racing in the silly way they did nowadays.

"Le-on-or-a," he said softly, enunciating each syllable lingeringly, as if he loved the sound.

"But you wouldn't call me that? It's a terrible mouthful."

"It's a beautiful name. The abbreviation is—too boyish."

"Oh, I can't face 'Leonora'! I should fill out at the chest at once, and take two sizes larger in shoes."

"Isn't there a poem about 'Lenore'? I once read something . . . rhymed with 'nevermore'——"

"You mean Edgar Allan Poe's *Raven?* I thought you had not time for—'such things'!"

"I haven't."

"That is a lovely thing—quite worth a little time. But

it's sad. He had lost his 'Lenore.' You have only just found—yours."

"Mine!"

The hand under the rug clasped hers more tightly. Again both fell silent, watching the seagulls and the sea.

This "business honeymoon," as Leo described it to Susie, did not appear incongruous. Nor did her hurried, private wedding. The usual elaborate paraphernalia surrounding this function held for her no attraction. Both were glad to escape it all. Until after the autumn motor-show Wallis was too busy to take a real holiday. "We will have one later, some time," he had suggested vaguely.

The train from Calais to Paris was crowded. Their reserved corner seats gave little opportunity for conversation; and in the dining-car confidential talk proved equally impossible.

Dusk crept over the outside world. The familiar shapes of trees took on grotesque, shadowy forms, as the express roared its way across France. And in place of the familiar landmarks which had become blurred in Leo's mind, new and grotesque forms rose in the gathering darkness. The thoughts of the man, too, darted down strange, little-considered avenues which gradually merged into one big highway, to which all else was, for a time, subordinate. With every jolt of the train, he realized the full significance of this glorious isolation with the girl who was now his wife. Every moment she appeared more provocative, more desirable. His own rash promise at Hindhead rang in his ears. Did she remember, he wondered? Up till now she had given so freely. What had her echo of his words portended?

"All—all—all——" The wheels of the train took the word and wove it into myriad tunes, each one more dominating than the last. He must have *all*. It had been the keynote to his success throughout life—this insistent craving to

conquer all within his path. "It is up to you—to you—to you," sang the train. "She is yours—yours—yours——" As the dominant desires, hitherto crushed by other ambitions, beat in his veins and fired his blood, the more grim grew his reserve, the more rigid his mouth, the more apparent his air of subtle mastery.

Leo's bursts of chatter gradually ceased. She gazed out at the darkening fields, uneasy qualms shaking her trust in the beauty of possession. This man was her husband. She glanced across now and then, always to find his gaze fixed upon her face. The new tenderness reserved for herself was not apparent now. The lines of his mouth were more determined than she had realized. Should he wish to claim anything he deemed his right. . . . People talked of husband's rights. . . . He had offered to take only what she could give. What more could she be expected to give, that would not fill her with horror, loathing? . . .

"It is a part of love, little Leo. Don't be afraid to recognize both." . . . Val's tall form seemed to rise before her in the railway-carriage, his Irish-blue eyes to smile down in the old whimsical way. Instead of bringing the fear and disgust of the past few weeks, he brought a queer sense of comfort. It was as if in a strange land among strange actions, some voice from home had whispered: "Courage! Everything is all right. We know."

She turned impulsively to the man opposite, and met his look critically. No smoldering, moody passion distorted the straightness of his regard. A little of the ebbing sense of safety in his presence returned. She smiled, leaning across and touching his knee.

"Are we nearly there? I'm rather tired."

He glanced at his watch. "About ten minutes." But he did not smile back. She wondered why. And in the taxi she wondered why he was so silent, why he did not take her

hand as he had on the boat—a hundred whys: the whys that probably course through the thoughts of every woman and man who are truly human some time or other down every age of the universe.

A budget of business letters—some marked "urgent"—and telegrams, greeted Wallis at the hotel. He glanced through them, frowning.

"I ought to answer some of these at once."

"Yes—do," she urged, with unnecessary vehemence. The incongruity of such a proceeding on her wedding night passed unnoticed in the opportunity it offered. He cast a quick look at her face, then at the lift waiting to carry them up-stairs.

"I shall be all right," she assured him. "Do attend to your letters. I'll say good night, and go straight to bed. It has been a—a tiring day——"

He was fitting each letter into a neat packet in his hands. When her hurried words broke off, he looked up, straight into her eyes, and spoke rather curtly.

"I shall come up—very soon."

She half turned toward the lift, and he caught her hand. "We must talk—I want to talk to you—I shall be up in about ten minutes."

The touch of his hand produced the usual strange weakness of will and limbs. There was no mistaking the compelling light in his eyes, when for an instant they met her own as she entered the lift. She nodded faintly in acquiescence. Then the lift shot upward, and he turned away with his letters.

Alone at last, with no further excuse for porter, maid or luggage boy, she became the prey to a turmoil of emotions. There was a communicating door in her room, half-open. . . The horrors of the night on the Scheidegg Pass seemed hidden behind that door, ready to spring. . . . What had his look

and tone meant, when he put her into the lift? Was this man too, in spite of his quietness and air of reliability, going to turn treacherous? All the vital facts of life loomed up now and surrounded her. It was impossible longer to turn her back upon them, and to refuse to recognize Love save in the aspect of a spiritual force. The facts assumed distorted shapes, crushing her old ideals of chivalrous devotion. And this terrifying mystery constituted marriage. What had she done? Blind, foolish moth—she had flown from the horror that only threatened to scorch, into the same in essentials, but one that owned *the right*—to burn, not merely scorch.

Walking up and down the room, she clasped and unclasped clammy hands, trying to still the tumult of alarm, muttering Val's words—those words that, in the train, had seemed to soothe. And again they calmed her into clearer reasoning. Wallis was a man of his word. She had only to remind him of their talk at Hindhead. There was nothing weak or passionate in his nature. . . . With an insecure feeling of relief, she unpacked what she needed for the night. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed and slipped off her shoes.

"I can't undress—yet," she thought. "He's a long time. Perhaps a kimono wouldn't matter. . . ."

And the girl who had allowed Valyran to sup in her room, to help her to undress, to come in and out with the freedom of a sister, threw off her traveling frock and wrapped the kimono closely round her form; then sat in trepidation, listening to every footfall.

As the minutes passed, the fears her reasoning had calmed menaced her again. She rose nervously and walked about the room. All at once she paused, struck by an idea. "I've only to lock the door—lock both doors. He would *understand*——" She darted across to the door opening on

to the corridor, and turned the key. In the act of doing so, another thought flashed into her mind. Would not this show distrust? Suspicion? Might it not put thoughts into his head that after all might not be there? To-morrow would she meet the same warmth in his clasp, the same softening in the eyes whose hardness sometimes had almost frightened her? Could she bear that hardness directed upon herself? All the queer restless craving she had suffered when parted from him for but a few hours rose in her heart, dyed her face scarlet, negatived her tremulous questions. She covered her eyes with hands that trembled.

The sharp click of the lift door was followed by a step she knew now among a thousand. In sudden panic she unlocked the door and fled back to the bed. She sank down, clutching the quilt on either side. He knocked twice before she could control her voice to reply; then he entered with his usual quiet deliberation. After one quick look in her direction, he turned back to close the door. . . . She heard the key turn in its lock.

"I thought you must be asleep," he remarked. There was nothing in his demeanor to cause the wildly beating heart that she tried in vain to stifle, lest he should hear its thumps.

"What"—she swallowed hard, conscious of the quaver in her voice—"do you want—want—to talk about?"

For a moment—it seemed minutes—he remained by the door, gazing across at her shining hair and quivering lips. Then he crossed to the bed and, bending down, took her face in his hands. He looked long and deep into the darkened eyes that clung, fascinated, to his own. With a little smile, but never a word, he placed an arm around her trembling shoulders, at last, and drew her close. She struggled faintly, but his clasp tightened. And the usual numbing weakness stole over Leo. Power of will, the wish to re-

sist, faded. In one last feeble effort, she threw back her head.

"Remember"—she gasped—"remember——"

"I remember." His voice sounded far away. The strength of his arms, the shining light in his eyes seemed to mesmerize her. "But—you will give? You can give. . . . You *want* to give——"

And all at once she understood the truth in his whispered words. For the last feeble wish to resist faded into a wild craving for this man who was her husband—a craving whose existence she had never even known about before.

With a choking cry, she flung her arms round his neck.

"Ah—Harry! . . . Harry! . . . Is this love? . . . Is this love?"

All the world outside his arms slipped away. His words reached her, passionate as her own:

"Yes, this is love. . . . My darling. . . . My wife . . . this is love. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

THE dream of dwelling in marble halls burst into glorious reality at Willerton. This originally small village had blossomed almost into a suburb of Cuvingham—a large industrial town about eight miles away. Nearly everything was manufactured at Cuvingham, including millionaires. They were thrown off periodically: the froth, so to speak, of the many boiling cauldrons. And they usually fell into a hall or a court somewhere about Willerton. If they could not find one ready made they built it. That was easy enough. The difficulty arose in avoiding repetition and yet procuring a sufficiently impressive address to be stamped upon thick note-paper. Thus it happened that Willerton could boast of *The* Grange, Elm Grange, Moat Grange, *The* Court, Hazel Court, Woodland Court. Halls were too numerous to mention; they were merely commas, punctuating the other residences.

A secondary accumulation of froth blew into smaller modern houses clustering round the station. These houses possessed geographical names, and their inhabitants formed a slightly lower strata in local society.

During the years 1914-1918 Cuvingham had basked in an era of unprecedented prosperity. Most of its trades being adaptable for war purposes, their organizers found themselves of too much use to their country to fight for it. Also, the health of many had been undermined by factory life. The war, however, came to Cuvingham in shortage of food and increase of paper money: therefore touching two tender

spots. . . . But no bombs disturbed its tranquil nights; nor was imagination its strongest point.

After the war, the disposal of several old family mansions coincided with a trade boom. The nymphs in the geographical chrysalides now fluttered forth into their true butterfly glory, by annexing real moated granges or ivied castles. Another stratum grew up round the station, known as the "new poor." It was a trifle aloof. One wondered occasionally over the poverty, but never over the adjective. The term is beautifully comprehensive.

News of a neighborhood wherein practically everybody belonged to trade might rejoice the heart of a theoretical Socialist—and who is more theoretical? "Fraternity!" he would cry.

Not at all. There is trade *and* trade. Who could expect the maker of aeroplane parts to feel an equality with the maker of tooth-brushes? The former would be settled in Havatem Hall and the latter only considering a refusal on Cumberland, just vacant. He was merely "a Cuvingham fellow" who did not yet know the difference between a cock and hen partridge. Havatem Hall was probably annexing "County" by now—either through marriage or money. . . .

Yet perhaps, in the vast cycles of the cosmic scheme, tooth-brushes and motor bodies are of equal importance and, paradoxically, of as little. If both failed, day would still follow night, summer winter: men would beget children, and cats kittens. . . .

In the trail of this magnificence—necessary adjuncts though completely overshadowed—staggered a few tags of professionalism. A new doctor set up on the outskirts of Willerton. The original one, after spending years in acquiring a country practise, found himself with a dwindling income. For the new doctor's methods were up to date, like his patients. By the old one and *his* patients he was consid-

ered dangerous. They played a kind of medical "Oranges and Lemons," the younger man, Doctor Dawes, being presumably the orange. He was a bachelor, too, with private means: a luscious orange.

Two Cuvingham lawyers hankering after country pursuits were led by the spirit to Willerton. One took a court; the other "Skegness" by the station; and their wives did not visit. Mrs. Bonne at the Court owned a second cousin who was married to a baronet. Therefore, of course, she could hardly visit with any one local. . . . Their husbands entertained vague but dark suspicions concerning each other's tactics; so they only just tipped their hats upon meeting—they did not raise them, nor keep them on and nod instead. A whole world lies in these signs.

A new and very ritualistic church had been built lately between Cuvingham and Willerton. It raised the Reverend Samuel Murray's hair on end. He viewed with intolerant contempt the young priest, who went about in his cassock. This contempt was returned in full. They never met unless the meeting proved unavoidable.

Therefore it will be seen that professionalism, though offering thanks for not being as other men were—shopkeepers and manufacturers—was much divided against itself. By mixing freely with trade, however, its pockets were lined. Gold bridges many gulfs. . . . All the different strata on the other side of the gulf liked, in their turn, to cling to the professional tendrils they could clutch.

When a new family came to Willerton, quite a flutter was caused. On the one hand competition arose between the members of Church, Law and Medicine. On the other, a calculation of pros and cons. Halls, courts and granges were not always as stable as they appeared. Care and discrimination were necessary in forming new acquaintances. Would it or would it not be advantageous to know this new

family? That was a difficult problem. One could never tell what position it might ultimately annex, storm, or wriggle into. Would the "County" recognize it? County did strange things sometimes. Precipitation was unwise, so was protracted hesitation. For occasionally fools stepped in—and the angels' tread never found a foothold on what would have proved a valuable ladder. . . .

When the Soap Knight who built The Towers retired from parochial councils to Parliament, Henry Wallis emerged from Cuvingham and took the house. Willerton pricked its ears. What could a rich man under forty want with such a mansion unless he meant to marry and settle down? The terms were synonymous in local circles, and formed the goal of marketable chickens. These began to trim their feathers, and their mother-hens to cluck gently, with sly pecks at other chickens. But Wallis appeared too busy making money to notice those anxious to spend it for him. In solitary glory he spent a year at The Towers in proof armor that even Mrs. Bolten could not pierce. Most men confided *something* to the chief widow; but he offered no confidence. She had become quite sure he possessed a secret trouble, when the blow of his marriage fell. All pecking and clucking ceased, petrified. Later it broke forth again in the heart of a family or the bosom of a friend.

"That's one in the eye for Mrs. Bolten!" clucked Mrs. Hawkes, wife of the big dairy firm in Cuvingham, and of Willerton Hall. Mr. Hawkes was so insignificant in comparison with the result of his enterprise, that Mrs. Hawkes really seemed more married to the firm than to the owner. People said she practically "ran the whole show"—including her husband and new country house. She was said to be a most enterprising woman—"could turn a cow's tail into money."

"That's a sell for Mrs. Hawkes!" Mrs. Bolten murmured

delightedly. "She was running him for Violet—anybody could see that!"

Violet Hawkes, being very refined, was able to correct her mother over vowel sounds and certain consonants. She was pretty, and was considered delicate—being addicted to catching things easily. During the war she caught influenza, measles and mumps. Now she was busy catching men. Henry Wallis having proved too elusive, she had turned him down to the level of an acquaintance, and was now concentrated upon Doctor Dawes and Arnold Kerry. . . .

The prospect of a wife at The Towers brought the usual delicate problems that, with a rich bachelor, had been slurred over. To what stratum would the household now belong? The bride was rumored to be "well-bred." She was also a friend of the vicar's wife. The status of clergy families is somewhat abnormal in a district where they almost exclusively provide the intellectual note. Besides, provincial County adores its clergy. Would County therefore "take her up"? It had not yet "taken up" Wallis, and a wife surely rose or fell to the rank of her husband? However, along the clerical bypath, she might reach these coveted portals. . . . Really the problem this time needed most delicate handling. A first call might be advisable; for a call provided an opening without closing the door upon an exit.

But a check arose to provide yet another problem. Newcomers to a country district are not usually honored by their first call until after they have appeared in church. That proves they are settled, and have unpacked their Sunday clothes—are ready to see and to be seen, in fact. It also sets a seal upon their respectability. The bride for whom all eyes were searching, failed to set that seal. Sunday after Sunday passed. . . . At last Mrs. Murray was approached. She was apologetic but unconvincing: Mrs. Wallis had been away so much with her husband . . . his business. . . .

That word "business" was a synonym for "Holy" in the ears of local wives. It was all-embracing. Very embracing indeed, for some of the husbands—but that is neither here nor there. . . . It struck the right note. Sympathy for a new wife whose sense of duty thus debarred her from showing off her trousseau overcame strict convention. Bits of pasteboard slowly accumulated in the big hall of The Towers. Perhaps curiosity proved an equal motive; but it remained unsatisfied.

In justness to Wallis it must be owned that his exactions scarcely warranted such self-sacrifice.

"Sam's sermons are simply indigestible!" Leo had declared before their first Sunday at Willerton; "and Susie will be hurt if I don't rave about them. For heaven's sake let's go to the sea or to a river each week-end, while this ripping weather lasts. You need fresh air, Harry, and it will keep up the honeymoon feeling." . . .

"Harry" could not resist that.

"And why should I vegetate here, while you are in London? You need relaxation, Harry. I'll choose some jolly plays, and we'll go together." . . .

And "Harry" could not resist that, either. He was a man very much newly-married just then. . . .

Mrs. Hawkes' curiosity was the first to be satisfied. She returned from her call, incredulity stamped upon her strong-featured face.

"Not a bit the sort of gir-rl you'd've expected 'Enery Wallis to marry!" she declared to Violet, with the extraordinarily useless relish of finding imperfections in a rival. "Her 'air's red!—downright red! Short too, and all untidy. It's not nicely bobbed, with a slide at one side, like those young ladies behind Bolten's counters. . . ."

Violet glanced at her own perfectly waved tresses mirrored in the glass opposite. "What had she got on, mother?"

"My dear! She wasn't in an afternoon dress at all! She was wearin' a short skirt and a jumper. And she was playin' clock-golf with that young man who sometimes stays at The Towers—a secretary, isn't 'e?"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Violet. "He's quite a common sort of man."

"Oh 'e's not a gentleman, anybody can see. I wonder 'Enery Wallis allows it, whilst 'e's away at work."

"Perhaps he doesn't know?"

"Ah!" Mrs. Hawkes nodded, and exchanged a meaning glance with this astute daughter. "I'd never trust red hair far," she murmured, with painful recollections of a "finishing" governess once engaged to complete Violet's incomplete education. Mr. Hawkes had lifted his eyes from cream and butter, allowing them to drift toward that damsel's auburn locks. He had even emerged from his whisky and newspapers, when his wife was "running" a committee meeting somewhere. . . . The finishing governess never finished: she departed.

"I must go and tell Mrs. Bolten," Mrs. Hawkes remarked, putting on her gloves again.

Mrs. Bolten for some reason couldn't help being a widow. She had been one for ten years, and her manner became a little more plaintive on each anniversary of her husband's death—though they had been on the verge of a separation when that deliverance occurred. She was small and piquant, with light blue eyes which acquired that curious "goo-goo" look in the presence of men. Her husband's family owned the huge drapery concern in Cuvingham, which perhaps accounted for her passion for clothes and her ever-changing wardrobe. Unfortunately, she was out when Mrs. Hawkes called at The Manor House. Mrs. Hawkes, therefore, told her chauffeur to drive to Elm Grange, where she and Mrs. Kerry spent a pleasant hour together. . . .

The very next day Mrs. Kerry called at The Towers. She had not done so before owing to a convenient delicacy of health when problems arose or unpleasantness occurred. Mr. Kerry owned a colliery some five miles away. He was a big boisterous man, very much pleased with the world's treatment of himself. Mrs. Kerry was thin, pale, and looked "nervy." They possessed two sons. Arnold, the elder, followed in father's gilded footsteps; Bevington was at Oxford. Bevington had been born with the dawn of affluence, when a "family name" had seemed to give more of an air than an every-day Christian one. The family of Bevington had once kept The Golden Hen near Dudley Port; but that was only a myth now. . . .

Mrs. Kerry found Mrs. Wallis alone, in a grimy overall, on her way to the garage. "And she actually asked me to go with her!" the ruffled lady exclaimed afterward, at dinner, gazing upon her husband and son as if to challenge their comprehension of this indignity.

"To the *garage?* On a first call?" Arnold was a correct young man who liked his surroundings to be well conducted. He was tall and good-looking, with well-oiled hair that possessed a suspiciously uniform wave. His clothes were scrupulously correct, and he dressed faultlessly every evening.

"Yes; you may well laugh, Tom!"

"What did you do there?" guffawed her husband. "Have tea?"

"No. She pushed a lot of tools off a chair with no back, and asked if I minded her just finishing 'a dirty little job' in her new car. Mr. Wallis gave her a two-seater Wallis-Milne for a wedding present, you know. It was worth eight hundred pounds, I believe! At least, Mrs. Bolten's chauffeur told her his brother—he's gardener at The Towers, you know—told him so; but——"

"Go on about the call, mother—we've heard all that doz-

ens of times." Arnold's filial manners sometimes failed to equal his others, and the others were often shadows. . . .

Mrs. Kerry complied meekly, as became the one woman of the family. She had been well-trained by her men-folk.

"Well—where was I?—Oh, yes! I said I'd rather stand. I had my best calling clothes on, you know, Arnie—the foulard. It cost thirty guineas, and I wasn't going to ruin it on that oily seat. . . . Well! she just sat down on the floor and stuck her head into the engine, with all that loose hair about——"

"*Loose* hair?" Mr. Kerry looked up from his fish.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you? It's all short——"

"Short! You don't mean to tell me Wallis allows his wife to have bobbed hair?"

"You may well stare, Tom! I did myself. It's red, too."

"Good lord!" murmured Arnie, looking as if he were about to be sick.

"I said, 'Why don't you let your chauffeur do these dirty jobs?' And she"—Mrs. Kerry laughed reminiscently—"she said, 'Because I know more about it myself.' Just fancy! Thinks she knows more than a man—and about machinery too."

Mr. Kerry laid down his knife and fork, and let out the roar that signified terrific amusement—what his wife called "Tom's real hearty laugh." Arnie, who knew a roar was "not done" nowadays, gave a few neighs and gazed at the ceiling.

"Is she a feminist? How odious!" he drawled, with the little lisp in his *s's* that was so fascinating. Then he sighed, and resumed his dinner.

"Wallis must be bewitched," remarked Tom, when the roar and its attendant choke had subsided. "I thought he was too sensible to allow himself to be caught by one of those modern young minxes."

Mrs. Kerry replied with the little shrug that says *"I* don't know."

"She isn't the sort one would have expected him to . . . in fact, she is extremely dull. There's nothing in her. Conversation was quite difficult."

Mr. Kerry guffawed again. "Have they made any alterations in The Towers?"

"My dear, I don't know! She never offered to take me over the house, though I gave her the broadest hints. She's very dense. And I wanted to know what new fittings Henry Wallis put in the bedrooms last year. . . . She even seemed uncertain about the wages her new cook is getting. The housekeeper is staying on and managing everything—and, between you and me—*that* won't answer! It wouldn't with me." No servant ever did answer with Mrs. Kerry. They left, on an average, once a fortnight. Had they ceased to do so, she would have lost her chief zest, barring her health, in life. As the joint arrived, she remembered her final disillusion. "Her ignorance is extraordinary! She had never even heard of floating kidneys. When I mentioned mine, she went into fits of laughter and said it sounded so funny—'like a goldfish!' . . . I wish I knew what she's giving that cook a year." . . .

But her men-folk had become more interested in the results of their own cook's efforts than in a neighboring cook's wages. Mr. Kerry enjoyed his food: on that matter there could be no doubt. He could not only be seen enjoying it, but heard as well. Mrs. Kerry loved to watch this enjoyment. It proved the high-water mark of success had been reached in her ideas of woman's place in the world.

Miss Freda Dawes—who kept house for her brother, the doctor—had the most awkward encounter with the newcomer whose stratum was yet problematical. With the original doctor in all the Countiest strongholds, Miss Dawes'

own position was none too secure at present. For her brother's sake she called conscientiously upon every likely patient (and young married women were excellent patients hereabouts, for in Willerton their sense of duty to the race was wonderfully strong); but afterward she had to be very careful. At the moment she was being very careful indeed. For a sprig of semi-County, grafted at Tullingham Hall, a mile away, having had a difference with the old doctor, had turned to the new. He had been called in to attend the plain daughter for influenza. She yapped a great deal about her horses, hunting, golf. As Doctor Dawes thought it worth while to yap back, Olive Merley considered him "possible," socially. So Mamma Merley called, in a manner from which she was obviously trying to keep all condescension, upon Freda. The Merleys were really established—quite old, in fact—for their money had been made in the last generation. It accumulated in something up North or down South, and this vagueness was an effective handle never allowed to slip into actuality. For though they knew themselves to be the Creator's favored tribe locally, it was necessary that others should never forget it. Edward, the son and heir, who resembled a canary, with his pale beak, yellow hair and small sharp eyes, had yapped through two golf foursomes now, with Freda. Therefore the necessity of care on her part will be understood. She was not *quite* sure of the Merleys yet. . . .

Late in the afternoon of Mrs. Kerry's call at The Towers, Freda met Mrs. Murray in the lane near the church. Being "High Church" (like the Merleys) she was (like the Merleys) not particularly friendly with Susie. But "the practise" had to be considered—especially just now. So she stopped and talked in an offhand way about parochial matters. When nobody more impressive than herself was present, Freda could be very offhand. She was the kind of girl

who talks loudly in public—especially in railway carriages—for the benefit of others.

Susan had barely been shouted at for five minutes, however, before a two-seater car whisked round the corner. It drew up, and the driver waved wildly.

"Hello, Su! Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

She shook her head. "But I wanted to see you, Leo. Sam wants to know if you will take my Sunday-school class . . . just for a few months." . . .

The new bride threw back her head with a shout of laughter. "Oh, my God—no! I haven't the least idea upon such things. . . . Is that Miss Dawes?" She leaned over the car, stretching forth a friendly gauntleted hand. "So sorry I was away when you called. Shall we consider the introductions over—Susie, where are your wits? No; it's too late now—Miss Dawes, I hear you play golf——"

At that moment the awkward thing happened. Freda, rather aghast at what she considered blasphemy; had laid a stiff gloved hand in the gauntlet's warm clasp. She would have preferred merely to bow at this first meeting, but the practise. . . . And at that unfortunate moment Olive and Edward Merley appeared in their car. It was still very uncertain if the Merleys would "take up" Mrs. Wallis. They were *most* particular. A girl who said "My God!"—which was a man's remark—would not go down with them at all. And now, in the precarious stage of their acquaintance, Olive and Edward saw Freda apparently on terms of bosom friendship, hand clasped in hand. . . . She hastily drew free; but it was too late. Olive's lips just moved in the slight disfigurement that meant a smile; then her eyes passed, with curiously wooden effect, over Leo. Edward, with apparent difficulty, moved his cap half an inch—and the car shot past.

Leo whistled. "Who are those—Superior Persons?" she asked, instinctively mimicking Olive's smile.

"The Merleys—from Tullingham Hall—friends of mine." An acid tone hid badly Freda's inward rage. At any other time Edward would have stopped. . . . "I must go. People coming to stay. . . . Good-by, Mrs. Murray——"

"Oh!" Leo broke in. "But I wanted to ask you about golf."

"I play—a little—with a few friends. My plans are uncertain at the moment. . . . May go away soon. Good-by, Mrs. Wallis." With a glance whose reproach Leo failed to understand, she turned hurriedly away.

Leo glanced at Susan and raised her eyebrows. "Swallowed a poker? Or what's the matter with her? Oh, Susie, who was that delicious canary-bird in the car, beside the girl like a weasel?"

"Leo! They're *the* people about here—with the exception of Bottreux Castle. Only that's shut up just now."

"*The* people? Then *the* people ought to have been drowned years ago! 'Dicky' looked as if he'd lost a worm——"

"Where are you going, Leo?"

"To Cuvingham, to fetch Harry. . . . And Miss Dawes looked as if she'd lost a worm, too. Perhaps they're each other's worm and have had a row?"

"Leo, how absurd you are! Now, about that Sunday-school——"

Leo opened the throttle, causing a deafening noise. "'I must go, my plans are uncertain,'" she mimicked Freda. "Why am I absurd? Most lives have a secret trouble—so Mrs. Kerry inferred just now. Susie! Have you heard of Mrs. Kerry's tragedy?"

"No. What? Leo, what?" Eyes opened wide in alarm, Susie laid her hand on the car. "Do tell me—what is it? Poor thing!"—with belated recollection of the sympathy expected of a vicar's wife.

Leo pursed her lips mysteriously, flicked off the hand, and slowly started the car. "There is Sam coming; he might hear," she murmured.

Curiosity outdid wifely welcome. Susan half-turned from her husband's approaching figure.

"Yes, yes—Leo, do tell me. . . . Whisper——"

"Her kidney floats—in aspic!" Leo shouted for the whole village to hear. Then she vanished in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VII

LEO drove on, with a quick smile at the Reverend Sam, whose mouth seemed to have dropped too wide open to be closed again. Since coming to Willerton she had been conscious of a slight sense of strain between Susan and herself. The vicar's wife was bound up and swathed around in domestic or parochial cottonwool which was utterly self-absorbent. Naturally she expected to find Leo in the same clogged condition. But Leo married caused her as much perplexity as Leo single. She felt disappointed; Leo felt nauseated. . . .

Her reflections were to-day somewhat mixed. The novelty of life since her marriage had been sufficiently engrossing to chase away the remains of fog: it had been dispersed by the rays of Harry's lantern. But the effects of the chill it had produced would perhaps never be quite shaken off. The chill had warped, a little, her sense of humor; caused a certain bitterness of outlook to make her intolerant of much that, in the past, would have left her unmoved. Half afraid of all this, she had clung to Harry, as one clings to one's lantern, knowing that away from its radius darkness lies.

The "business honeymoon" had proved an unqualified success. Her utter capitulation—that incomprehensible passion for her husband which his own had awakened by its very quietness—though surprising both, had swept them into an enchanted land. They had been too self-engrossed for conscious differences; too infatuated for criticism.

Only once had a hitch arisen. This happened in a casino. Harry sprang from the classes to whom such places savored of the devil. Nevertheless, conquering hereditary repugnance, he humored Leo's whim to go, and while they sat over iced drinks in the concert-room, all had been well. But when Leo carelessly announced her intention of playing roulette, he had been so startled as to be peremptory. She had stared in blank amazement, then flushed angrily. It was ridiculous, she protested hotly,—absolutely medieval! She had played roulette dozens of times. . . . Quite impervious to the red lights in her eyes, his own seeming to become veiled in a film of cold steel, he repeated his refusal to take her to the roulette room. "Well—that doesn't matter," she remarked—calmly, with set face. Pulling her cloak closer, with fingers that were not quite steady, she turned and swept off by herself. He had started up, had been delayed by a waiter with the bill, had lost sight of her, and, in cold anger, returned to his seat. . . . Leo played thoughtlessly, recklessly, for five minutes. Then her rage evaporated, overpowered by the memory of those cold eyes. She forgot to stake, feeling suddenly bored with the game. She also felt extremely foolish, rather miserable, and more than a little afraid. . . . With equal precipitancy she rose and hurried back to the concert-room. He sat at the same little table, a cigarette between his fingers, at which he was gazing absent-mindedly. The tired look round his eyes was intensified. But the same steeliness, when he glanced up, at her touch on his shoulder, caused her voice to falter.

"L—let us go, Harry." . . .

Without a word he rose. Neither spoke during the short walk to the hotel, and Leo felt herself drifting out into the old sea of fog. Once within their rooms, she forestalled all expostulations by throwing her arms round his neck and forcing his head down to her own. When at last her lips

found his, she felt the stiffness of his frame relax. He drew her close, and no words ever passed between them upon the subject. In her action he read future submission to his will. Leo felt the fog roll away, and congratulated herself upon thus easily having frustrated "a breeze."

Since their return, business had engrossed Harry, save at week-ends, to the extinction of all else. But he found Leo keenly interested in the novelties or new patents being prepared for the show. With amused pride in the consternation she caused, he took her over the huge works at Cuvingham. The air of humoring a child, which the various overseers usually adopted toward women visitors, faded into embarrassment. Leo did not smile in pretty bewilderment, nor did she regard those fine fellows with eyes of incredulous admiration. She poked fingers into intricate bits of machinery; stated facts, and asked for their corroboration; even expressed decided views not always flattering. A few of Wallis' men hoped she would not come again in a hurry. When bluff proves no armor, such are indeed undone. Others thought her wonderful, but a little too intelligent for a wife—not quite their idea of "a womanly woman." . . .

Leo's chief reflection, on the way to the works this evening, concerned a curious little episode that had occurred at breakfast to-day—an episode to which this unusual jaunt to fetch her husband, owed its origin. The huge library at The Towers was completely empty. The furniture had been chosen, and this morning Harry had announced his intention of ordering "some firm that would know what a library should possess" to stock the room's empty book-shelves.

Leo had thrown him a look of horror. "It sounds like stocking a farmyard! Oh, no!"

"Why not?" he asked; and the very fact of asking such a question gave her a faint—very faint—shock. She hesi-

tated, wondering how to explain what should not need explanation. His next words had strengthened the shock. "A reliable firm would know better than either of us what books a library ought to have."

"But—surely what it *ought* to have doesn't matter! That would be such a soulless kind of room. Books grow up around one gradually, like friends. They are so human."

"Oh!—oh! Come!" He rose, with the indulgent laugh her ideas often provoked, and brought his cup for more coffee. "This isn't a house for poets and other Johnnies! I haven't time to moon among a few thousand volumes until I have chosen enough."

"I could soon suggest a hundred or two"—she handed him his cup, with a little frown of annoyance—"and surely you have your own old favorites."

"My dear girl, you forget that my life has been full of other matters. Only technical books have been of use to me."

"That's a pity, Harry. You have turned a lot of beauty out of your life."

"I had to grapple with realities, not play with 'beauty.'"

"Oh, yes, yes! You always tell me that"—the irritation still sounded in her voice—"I suppose—that's it," she added, half to herself.

"That's—what?" He was gathering his letters together, and he glanced toward her casually, unaware of any deeper meaning in the words.

She made no reply. The car could be heard purring outside, waiting to take him to the office. He had no time for petulance that he could not understand. It was better left alone, to wear itself off.

"Well—good-by, dear!" he said cheerfully, bending to kiss the shining head. He waited for the response that did not come, then turned and hurried away.

And when the car had vanished down the drive, Leo's irritation evaporated as speedily as her anger in the casino.

"Beast!" she apostrophized herself. In the circumstances it was ridiculous to expect their points of view always to tally. There would be many differences, which would need tact, careful adjustment—

"A gulf that can never be bridged."

Leo sprang to her feet to obliterate words idly spoken some months before. Ridiculous words! Harry had proved himself master of circumstances. His enterprise had been boundless. What had she ever done in comparison, that she should allow any tiny differences to cause such irritation?

At midday she rang up Harry, to ask if he could come home for lunch; but he was not at the office. By evening he had been reared to one of those delicate pedestals Leo built so fatally high; and the usual order to Wiggins, the chauffeur, was countermanded. She would fetch Harry herself. She would *make up*.

The Wallis-Milne Works and grounds occupied some acres upon the western outskirts of Cuvingham. They were run upon modern lines which embraced playing-fields, luxurious canteens, well-built cottages, each with its little garden. Once a slum, this neighborhood now resembled a garden city. Leo's heart rose high with pride, and Harry's pedestal grew more lofty as she drove down the wide road between the rows of cottages, into the broad sweep of drive leading to the head office.

Harry stood outside, evidently bidding farewell to some illustrious personage, who drove away in a car almost the size of a room, complete with chauffeur, footman and crest. Leo, driving quietly up behind, watched her husband unobserved for a few minutes. His face looked, as usual, grave and rather rigid, the tired lines very evident. Once

he passed his hand, with a gesture of weariness, over his brow.

"Business," she supposed—the everlasting business, business, business. . . . For an instant the pathos as well as the mistake of a life which held "no time" for anything else struck her forcibly. It was one-sided, unbalanced. . . .

Then the big car rolled away, and Harry turned and saw her. And the quick change in his face caused her own to glow. He came to the side of the car.

"Where have you sprung from? What has happened? Isn't Wiggins——"

She laid a hand over his which rested on the door. "Nothing's happened. I came to fetch you myself because —I wanted you."

He gave her a quick searching look. "Why? What do you want?"

"Oh, Harry!" She laughed at this male obtuseness, and flicked his thumb. "Can't I want you—just *you*—for *yourself?*"

"My darling!" The head of the Wallis-Milne Company barely remembered in time the many windows behind them, the throngs of homeward-bound men outside the gates in front. He contented himself with squeezing the gloved hand. "It's—really it's—to hear you say that! After a most tiring day, too!"

"Fetch your hat, and we will go for a drive."

"It sounds delightful. But I must go home and attend to letters. I really *must*, dear. Wiggins can catch the last post with them. I won't keep you many minutes. . . ."

Leo felt annoyed with disappointment. This was typical of their evenings nowadays: everlasting letters, everlasting phone calls—everlasting business. Upon his reappearance she resolutely thrust the annoyance into the background. As they drove through the thronged streets, and she noted the

respect, the obvious pleasure and affection, with which he was greeted on all sides, pride again welled uppermost. And in his heart too, there was pride: pride in the dainty figure at his side, in her management of the car among the crowds—unconscious of being watched by all eyes—above all, pride in the love which her frank words had implied.

Weddings and funerals are popular functions among the British laboring classes. Beyond brief glimpses on her visit to the works, and at the "beanfeast" after their honeymoon—when a sumptuous wedding present had been given—the employees had not seen their "boss's" bride. Women and children, thronging open doorways, joined in the greeting. Wallis caught a few admiring remarks. And he may be pardoned for the exultation he felt in his marriage. It seemed to him that the fairest crown in Christendom had been set upon his upward career and all its success.

When at last they had threaded the crowded streets and turned into the Willerton Road, Leo leaned close to his arm.

"What has been specially 'tiring' to-day, Harry?"

"Oh—some knotty bits of business," he replied vaguely. This vagueness over his work was often another source of irritation to Leo, unused to men who never shared their deepest interests with women. Longing to step in, and capable of stepping in, she seemed to be resolutely shut outside a room—his chief room too. "What have you been doing?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Nothing much. Feeling a pig. Harry, I—I *was* piggy, at breakfast! Do you——"

"Oh—*that!*" He laughed—the usual little indulgent laugh. "I've arranged about the library over the phone. Milne told me of the best firm. . . . A man's coming down next week."

To Leo, expecting the kiss of forgiveness, this resembled

a slap in the face. With both hands she gripped the steering-wheel hard, clutching too at the memory of her after-breakfast reflections.

The silence was very long—so long that Wallis glanced at her twice. At last she framed a careful question:—

"Why didn't you ask—me about it again, first?"

"Ask you again? Oh—well—dearest, a man is master of his own house, isn't he?"

The car's pace increased to such an extent that Harry murmured a warning. He also had felt annoyed this morning. The moment for making his last remark had seemed propitious; but he did not wish to enlarge upon it. Leo's little flares of temper might soon lose the charm of novelty. . . .

"You can work with the man, when he comes. I hope you will, in fact—and include all your own favorites. Really, it's best, Leo. We shall be glad, later on, to possess books we might not have heard of. You may pick up some rare editions, too."

She recognized the sense in his words. But such high-handed overruling could not easily be forgotten.

"I suppose so," she replied, in a tone which indicated the subject held no interest.

After a judicious interval Harry steered away from dangerous ground.

"You haven't told me what you have been doing with yourself all day?" He was sufficiently newly wed to be really interested in this matter.

"I went to the links this morning."

"Did you get a game?"

'Of course not. Nobody exactly gushes at one about here. I saw two women playing in evening frocks."

"What?"

"Frocks that would content me for evening wear, at any

rate—very low and skimpy. They looked so funny in golf bunkers."

Wallis made no reply, the clothes problem being still a delicate one. The secret code of what constituted good dressing was proving, as yet, undecipherable. Finding Leo cared for this stupid-looking game, he had joined the West Cuvingham Links with her, as a matter of course. For a wife to join without her husband would have seemed almost indecent locally. Wives never went one way and husbands another. The usual procedure was for the husband to join first; then the wife, finding herself alone both in business hours and out of them, joined in self-defense. The only other alternative—less play by the husband—was, of course, absurd. Golf, however, formed one of the things for which Harry's life had "had no time." Thus Leo was left to find her own partners.

The car was approaching the lodge gates of The Towers, when two women—one big and the other small—appeared round the corner, and held up beckoning hands.

Leo drew up with a bump, astonishment in her eyes. "Who are they?" she whispered quickly. "I—I've seen them before."

"Miss Dunne and Miss Blake."

"Blake? *Blake?* . . ."

While the introductions were being made, she racked her brains unsuccessfully. These were the two women who, with Mothersill and folding chairs, had vainly sought a spot safe from the sight and sound of seasickness. But—Blake? That name belonged to the woman who came to Lake Thun. . . . ("Their name is Blake—I looked in the book.")

"Yes. . . . I think we have met," she agreed, at their hesitating recognition. "On the boat to Calais—in June. Did —did you 'last'?"

"Oh, no," sighed Miss Dunne, the bigger woman. "I never do. It's other people's fault. They are so inconsiderate about where they are ill. . . ."

"We heard you had joined the golf club?" Miss Blake turned to Wallis.

"Yes. My wife plays; I don't."

A conversation that sounded Greek to Harry then followed.

"You'll like our golf club," Miss Blake wound up. "We have such jolly knitting afternoons there."

"Knit!" began Harry, but an elbow in the pit of his stomach silenced him. The reply kept him silent.

"I shall be able to knit my husband's socks," Leo observed.

This quite won the heart of Miss Blake, whose passion was knitting jumpers. It won the heart of Miss Dunne too, whose passion was Romance.

"A sweet girl!" both exclaimed, out of earshot. "And we thought the red-haired girl on the boat looked fast!"

"Perhaps"—Miss Dunne had a merciful heart when Romance softened it—"that was her brother she was with—who said he would be ill." . . .

Harry was laughing over the golf knitting-club, as they bowled up the long drive; but Leo seemed unusually serious. "Blake," she muttered. "Blake—is—is there a Mrs. Blake, Harry?"

"No. Why?—At least, yes. A cousin of Miss Blake's comes down with his wife sometimes."

"Oh. . . . I wonder——"

"What?"

A babel of dogs saved a reply, when the car drew up at the hall door. The only excuse for the late owner's choice of a name consisted in two little turrets rising above oriel windows in the hall. It was an immense house, red brick,

with several gables and a large portico. Ivy and creepers—scarlet now, or bronze—rendered picturesque what would have looked otherwise too massive.

Picking up Mink, the Yorkshire puppy, Leo left Harry to the embrace of his terriers, and went indoors, straight up the broad stairs, and down the passage to her bedroom. There she found Ross, her maid—an unforeseen luxury upon which Harry has insisted—laying out a dinner dress. Leo had not quite conquered her fear either of this correct and disdainful damsel, or of Pomfrey, the ultra-dignified butler who, she said, exactly resembled his own effigy. Ross never chatted, as Mrs. Marten would have done. She "knew her place," and she expected Leo to know hers.

But to-night Leo's thoughts were too much occupied by other fears for fear of Ross. Two discoveries had been made during the homeward drive. The name of Blake had brought back, with vivid suddenness, those days spent near Thun. So vividly, that Val's words, his voice, his very form, had been conjured up as if by the hand of a magician. And in this memory lurked none of her past loathing. All the disgust and anger had vanished: she could think now of Val quite unemotionally. After her wedding-night Val had dropped away into the background limbo of things for ever past. And now, with his resurrection, so to speak, she discovered her views to have changed. This fact was quite clear to her, and she felt puzzled—even afraid. For could a few weeks of married love have uprooted all her old bearings, have changed her ideals, her fastidious notions of honor?

And parallel with this discovery ran the other—more tangible, and not to be viewed dispassionately. This was the sudden exposure by her husband of the iron hand in the velvet glove. That it existed, she had vaguely suspected since her wedding-night. But to-day, for the first time, it

had been drawn forth, with unabashed deliberation, in all its nakedness. Of course such a thing was absurd—medieval. Nowadays husbands and wives were co-equal, partners, joint heads of their household. It was another little matter not quite understood by Harry, needing tact, adjustment. . . . And after dinner she would thresh out the little matter once for all, while the machinery was yet in motion. That would be quite simple, and would prevent future repetition. . . .

For once she was glad of Pomfrey's presence during the formal dinner, which, in the country, seemed rather absurd each night. Harry, evidently absorbed in his business problems, was inclined to be silent.

"We will have coffee in my room," she said, at the end of the long meal. "I want to speak to you about—something, Harry."

He followed her into the pretty little sitting-room she had made her own, and waited silently until coffee had been served.

"Well?" he encouraged, when they were alone.

But she evaded his eyes and did not begin. All at once this simple matter assumed gigantic proportions. She walked away to the window, then back to the fireplace. How was it possible to remind her own husband of certain ineradicable differences in their birth and upbringing, which a reference to these things he failed to understand would inevitably do?

"What is the momentous 'something'?" he asked, watching her closely.

"I——" She stopped, drank her coffee, and laid down the cup; then gazed thoughtfully at her bronze shoes. "My cigarette is out," she observed lamely.

Harry suddenly laughed. He crossed the room, and threw an arm round her shoulders.

"Perhaps I know? You were angry with me in the car? And you are a modern woman? And you don't agree with my views? And I am an old-fashioned, ill-mannered duffer who must be taught differently."

"Oh, Harry! How—how did you guess—I mean——"

He laughed again. Then his face changed abruptly. With his free hand he raised her chin, and he looked long and deep and earnestly into the eyes that met his own.

"I am—all that," he confessed with disarming simplicity. "Marriage is one of my old-fashioned notions. Every syllable of our marriage vows was real to me, my Leonore."

"And—to—me," she murmured, her strength of body and mind weakening, as usual, in this close contact. Her eyes darkened and wavered from his.

He kissed her lips. "But not—just one? Is that it? Yet you offered no objection at the time."

"Ah, but, Harry——"

"Ah, but—but—*but*"—he kissed her again and held her close—"we are one—indissolubly one—in everything. *But* —my dearest—I mean to be master of what is my own."

Her head was hidden on his breast, and she made no reply.

"You wouldn't care for me—otherwise," he added, with rare intuition—and something in Leo's struggling, fluttering heart echoed an acquiescence. . . .

"Well?" he whispered, after a long silence.

She raised her head and, as she had done after the casino incident, threw her arms round his neck and pressed her lips to his.

"Harry—Harry . . . Harry . . ." she cried chokingly. . . .

And thus was her simple little matter "threshed out."

CHAPTER VIII

WITH the approach of the Motor Show, business—Leo began to hate the word—engrossed Harry yet more. Most of his brief hours at home were spent in his study with a secretary. He became abstracted, when not working; less interested in Leo's doings and less inclined to discuss his own.

Woman's position—that of overseer of man's creature comforts and of amusement for leisure hours—was one hitherto unknown to Leo. She had shared man's work during the war. From childhood she had been used to circles—chiefly artistic, often slightly Bohemian—in which men and women shared both thought and activities; wherein, intellectually and in practical matters, each formed a strong force in the life of the other. This knowledge of being shut outside Harry's chief room exasperated her at times. Any reference to the subject proved useless.

"Why? What do you want to know? It wouldn't interest you. . . . I'm too tired now, to go through it all again.". . . .

Wallis belonged to the classes in which the sexes do not amalgamate intellectually. Under stress of work the novelty of a wife who could understand a man's great affairs was wearing off, though he was unconscious of the fact.

For a time Leo grappled with the problem, forcing herself into his confidence. It is the chief problem of an industrial magnate's wife. While seizing it with one hand, she loosed it gradually with the other: "He *is* tired. . . . It isn't fair to make him talk work when his mind could rest. . . ."

During the show this drifting tendency was thwarted. Leo stayed with him in London, entering, with her usual enthusiasm, into the novelty of the position. She charmed those in high places, whom Wallis wished to charm. What would have been stiff luncheons were transformed by her into joyful gatherings. She arranged dinners and theater parties, mixing the people necessary to his interests with friends of her own; carrying off the occasionally strange situation with a light and winning hand.

"A perfect hostess—that's me. And I never knew it!" she laughed one night, on their return to the hotel.

"A perfect treasure!" Harry retaliated fondly.

"It's 'my bit'—to use an old tag. But—again—it's only the kick of a flea——"

"Which goes a—a damned long way! Wasn't that it?"

"I *do* want to help, Harry. Oh, that Lord—what's his name?—sloppy-eyed man—is going to have two of your—of *our*—cars to take abroad."

Harry swung round from a bundle of late letters. To him that meant serious business.

"Really? I thought he had decided on the Rolls."

"He had. That's why I asked him to dinner to-night." Coming close she took his face between her hands. "Leave those beastly letters and come to bed, darling. You look so fagged. And I want to talk about the play. Wasn't it *clever?* That speech of——"

His kiss silenced her lips. "Very good," he assented vaguely, his eyes straying to the open letter he held. "I shall come—very soon."

Proud though he might be of his wife, a business man's work comes first. To waste time talking about a play while other matters awaited consideration was unthinkable. When at last he went to bed Leo was asleep.

The show and its extra rush of work quite over, Wallis'

interest in his home revived, together with other, more social, ambitions. Though a thing apart, home life must do its share in furthering the success of business. The time had arrived for establishing the position of The Towers in social circles to correspond with the position of the Wallis-Milne Company in those of trade. But here a hitch occurred. Local etiquette forbade entertainment before first being entertained. That a prophet hath no honor in his own country is a well-known adage. However great be the renown of a name throughout the globe, in its local circles if Mrs. A. does not "take up" the owner thereof, Madams B. to Z. would never dare to do so; their own prestige would be too much endangered. Although, *away* from the local circles, they might be proud to acknowledge an acquaintance with the owner of the name. . . .

Quite a number of cards had been left by now at Leo's front door; quite a number of calls patiently endured and returned. Yet, beyond Susan's tea-parties and Mrs. Bolten's little dinner, no hospitality had been offered. For one thing, the number of cliques around Willerton rather quashed the spirit of true hospitality. And, also, people were still using discrimination, working out their pros and cons. It was known that the Merleys had not yet called at The Towers. . . . Therefore, while the exact stratum of the household hung in the balance, a somewhat awkward pause ensued.

Susan's tea-parties did not exactly help this hiatus. After attending one, Leo refused to attend another. She had paused on the threshold of the vicarage drawing-room, horrified almost into an ignominious flight by the sea of women's hats and faces. Every face turned her way, causing her to feel about four inches high.

"Lord, Su!" she muttered hoarsely. "What a hen-pen! Isn't there one blessed man to leaven things?"

Apparently marriage had not cured what Susan considered a weakness for men.

"Sam will be here, soon," she replied consolingly. "Other men are too busy for tea-parties. Besides, they wouldn't care for them unless there were cards. And Sam doesn't like cards in the daylight."

Leo muttered something incoherently. The Reverend Sam's views were usually mystifying. She presumed he would play golf or tennis in daylight; but one never could tell. . . . All conversation had ceased, and her brain felt too bewildered for reasoning. There were no subtleties in Willerton. Every eye stared unblinkingly, with unabashed appraisement. Conscious of one pair fixed upon her shoes, another on her furs, three or four on her hat, Leo grew hotter and hotter. "I do hope nothing's coming down," she thought, glancing anxiously below her skirt, then toward the eyes inclined that way. Only slightly discomfited, they moved round to her back. . . .

Presently she found herself on a couch beside Mrs. Hawkes, and conversation broke forth once more. Each lady having made up her mind upon the remarks she meant to make afterward about "that Mrs. Wallis," could now attend to other affairs.

Mrs. Hawkes had been upon the brink of influenza last week—the *very brink*. Without waiting for the newcomer to ask for details of this tragedy, she proceeded to give them. The narration took about ten minutes, during which Leo ate a comfortable tea. As the breath of the last word died away, Mrs. Hawkes laid her hand on the girl's knee and lowered her voice almost to a whisper.

"And *what* d'you think of the Crown Derby?"

"Crown Derby?" echoed Leo, vaguely.

"Mr. Wallis' Crown Derby dessert service. Isn't it a real peach? We was both after it at the same sale. But the

gentleman who was bidding for me wouldn't go to 'Enery Wallis' figure. It was—there now! I declare—I've forgot for the minute. How much was it he gave?"

"Really, I have no idea." Leo's voice sounded cold; but nothing daunted Mrs. Hawkes on the scent of a price.

"You don't mean to say you don't know? Not really——"

"He bought it before our marriage."

"Yes—of course. But—*surely* he's told you what 'e gave for it?"

"No."

"Well, I never! . . . And that little statue—a Venus or Cupid or some such thing—'e got at the same sale. My word! but aren't you a lucky girl to come in for all these lovely things, and that beautiful 'ouse! I'm sure you'd ought to be very happy."

"Do you think big houses and many possessions mean happiness?" Conscious of Mrs. Hawks' blank stare, Leo hurried on: "I mean—sometimes they might be a nuisance—a tie. But they're jolly, of course."

Such an adjective in this connection was incomprehensible to Mrs. Hawkes. There had been a look of awe, of reverence, in her face when alluding to the Crown Derby: this merged into perplexity. Fortunately just then her advice was demanded by somebody who was annoyed about the wages she was giving to a cook.

Leo found herself pleasantly free for a time. On her other side Violet Hawkes and Freda Dawes were engaged upon the verbal annihilation of some member of the golf club who had won a prize which Freda considered she ought to have won.

Leo knit her brows, puzzled. These were not the ideals of sport in which she had been reared. Thus openly to show one's greed for victory revolted her fastidiousness. And

this mania for possession—how strange it seemed! It was so vastly different from the beautiful spirit of possessiveness which had pervaded her heart since her marriage.

Another hush greeted the solemn entry of Mrs. Bonne, from the Court. As befitted the second cousin-in-law of a baronet, Mrs. Bonne dwelt aloof and fraternized with the County and the Church. Sometimes she floated into drawing-rooms and allowed a more mixed community to hand her cakes. Sometimes, in the philanthropy which surrounded her name in charity lists, she picked up an every-day pedestrian toiling in the dust of her "limousine." For some reason this was considered extraordinarily kind of her. Those kidnapped talked about the journey quite a lot—though, as a matter of fact, they found it extremely dull.

She seated herself, now, close to Susie, and ignored everybody else save for a bow. Leo could not help mimicking this bow, in reply. Finding herself left out of neighboring conversation, she watched and listened—pondering over this assembly. To her mind it resembled some pulsating, living organism without a heart. All the little couples or cliques oscillated apart, each one quizzing the other, each encased in unbending hoops of self-protection, with no centrifugal force of brotherhood to whirl them round in unity. Once or twice Leo tried to break a hoop, but without success. Outside the orbit of local interests—local gossip—she quickly perceived no other conversation to be thought worth attention.

Such stupendous localism was another novelty; but it lacked humor to one alone, beyond its net. Leo's usual camaraderie was thwarted. For about here the spirit of camaraderie remained unknown. People viewed each other critically, considering their own opinions of their neighbors before considering the neighbors themselves; treated local matters very intensely, not to say heavily. With no other

thought than to be friends with all the world, she found herself to-day, as upon other social occasions in Willerton, thrown back upon herself alone—shut out. In this world of plain pleasant facts, one must make them into gods; then other worshipers will recognize a kindred spirit.

"Poor little Su!" she thought, watching her friend's efforts to please. "I begin to see her meaning. . . . Gulfs. . . . But there must be bridges? Surely? I—I wonder——"

The general verdict upon the bride agreed with that of Mrs. Kerry: "Dull. . . . Nothing in her. . . . Doesn't seem interested in—*things*. Mrs. Hawkes says she doesn't even care for her own house—thinks it a tie." . . .

Mrs. Bolten's dinner proved no more successful. Mr. and Mrs. Kerry, Arnie, Mrs. Hawkes and Violet completed the number, with the aid of Doctor Dawes and Mr. Wood. Mr. Hawkes never went out in the evenings. People said he preferred his whisky to the company of his fellow-men. Mr. Wood was distinguished in being the only bachelor over thirty in the neighborhood. People said he had private means—quite five hundred pounds a year, Mrs. Hawkes believed—and really need not therefore *do* anything in life. But Mr. Wood said he preferred to do something for the world he lived in—which was kind of him, though it puzzled one to know how he could have done anything for another world. He advanced this one in some important position—which nobody ever quite discovered—in Cuvingham's chief brewery.

Upon being introduced to Mrs. Wallis, Arnie adopted his usual patronizing attitude. He never believed in making himself "cheap" with women. Leo found conversation difficult; for Arnie was used to basking in girls' admiration—to being entertained, not to entertaining them. If not amused, he testified to their deficiency by a bored silence. He never tried, nor wished for, an interesting conversation.

Leo tried golf; but, like Miss Dawes, he was too wary to show any interest beyond: "Oh, yes—I potter round the links now and then, if there's nothing better to do."

She tried theaters. "Oh, no," drawled Arnie, showing an inclination to yawn. "I don't go to plays—such awful rubbish usually. Sometimes I go to a revue with fellows in town. I'm rather particular, though, in my tastes."

"Perhaps"—Leo struggled valiantly to control her twitching lips—"perhaps you are a great reader?"

Arnie smiled tolerantly. "Newspapers, of course—one must."

"Not novels? Poetry——"

"Oh!" Arnie neighed hoarsely, "*I* never read novels! I leave them and—poetry—to the ladies."

"I see. You mean"—her face was that of an artless maiden at her first grown-up party—"you don't consider a man's mind capable of appreciating—Shakespeare or—Thackeray? Do you really think woman's intellect *is* so much finer? It's an open question, I think; but you——"

Arnie stared blankly. So this *was* a feminist! "I—oh—well," he neighed in embarrassment; "I—I think intellectual women are the plague!" Sure of scoring a point he began another neigh, which halted quickly.

"Have you met any? I mean—I should scarcely think you are troubled with the plague hereabouts enough to need inoculation. . . . But what do you do with your spare time? Hunt or——"

"Dance—chiefly. But"—he hurried to cover up this possible loophole—"I only dance with four people about here. They suit my step." Arnie was determined not to be "drawn in." This was a most uncomfortable girl—not at all a womanly woman.

Violet was one of the favored four. He liked her "type"; she was pretty, could dance his steps, and was musical. That

is to say, she could rattle off current revue tunes quite well, without the score. Violet, seated between her two chief friends, was in her element. Doctor Dawes—a heavy-featured young man with strong pince-nez—gazed at his plate without troubling to make an effort toward the success of the party. Perhaps he was mad with jealousy over Arnie.

After dinner bridge was started—the only aid to digestion understood by Willerton. Mrs. Bolten suggested two mixed tables: "If the gentlemen don't mind playing with us ladies," she added diffidently.

The "gentlemen" mumbled politely in their throats. "I'm sure the ladies are very kind to play with *us*." Mr. Kerry, a gallant in his youth, was tacitly elected spokesman.

Leo had begun a polite laugh at the question, which she imagined to be a feeble attempt at a joke. In amazement, perceiving her mistake, she covered the laugh by a cough. Two rubbers were arranged with "mixed" tables; after which self-denial, "the gentlemen" should play together.

Leo partnered Arnie against Harry and Mrs. Hawkes. She was not a good player; and she made that heathenish mistake—that downright sin—of treating bridge as a game. *A game.* . . . No wonder Arnie wiped the perspiration off his brow! His partner laughed quite happily if she lost a likely trick—which often happened. She even *talked*—until the gloom around subdued her wanton lightness.

The second rubber witnessed a terrible disaster: she revoked. The discovery was made by herself.

"Oh!" she cried—quite gleefully—"stop! I must have revoked last round. I have another heart—but it's only a beastly little one."

Arnie laid down his cards and stared at her. Then he stared at Wallis. Wallis flushed and stared at his fingernails. Mrs. Hawkes breathed "My word!" and stared at Arnie.

"That'll make it your rubber," said Arnie in a tone of sepulchral calm. "Do you realize you have lost the rubber?"

"Let me die the death!" muttered Leo. "Harry, have you a purse? Then please pay yourself."

When "the gentlemen" were plunged in gloom over their game, sustained by syphons and whisky, "the ladies' " table fizzled gradually out. In the middle of the first rubber Mrs. Kerry and Mrs. Hawkes became involved in a discussion over the best way of doing up a Sunday's joint for Monday's consumption. They entirely forgot what were trumps, and suggested another deal. Leo nearly went to sleep in the warmth of a huge fire, and revoked twice. Violet—faithful friend that she was—could not keep her eyes from the other table.

After one rubber, therefore, bridge was relinquished for conversation—carried on in undertone so as not to disturb the gentlemen. Violet sat down by Leo and became confidential about clothes and matrimony. She enlightened Leo with descriptions of past friends—chiefly met during the war, when she had been a flapper. Apparently they had taught her to smoke, and loaded her with confectionery.

"I've never bought a box of chocolates or cigarettes in my life!" she declared with pride. "Have you?"

"Heaps."

Violet scrutinized her in pitying wonder—evidently she was not "a man's sort." . . .

"I must show you my presents from the battlefields," she offered kindly. "Did you collect many?"

"None. I'm not keen on accumulating—things. They become a tie."

Here again—the strange mania for possessions! Why, she wondered, had she never desired *things?* Why, nowadays, did she feel different from those around her? She had never done so before. . . .

No: the evening had not been a social triumph! She was conscious of being voted a failure by this gathering. Harry was uncomfortably conscious of this failure too. It made him somewhat irritable during the homeward drive.

"You must try to take things more seriously, Leo," he urged. "If you don't take games seriously you will never be good at them."

"Don't particularly want to be," confessed the bridge-heathen, stifling a yawn. "I can't play just to win."

"What else do you play for?"

"What—else?" Leo's brows contracted in the darkness. She sat up, and drew a long breath, gripping her hands tightly. Then she leaned back.

"Oh—Harry!" she said, and quickly turned the subject.

Altogether these first three or four months of married life were rather bewildering. They seemed composed of subtle shocks—sometimes without, and sometimes within, her home life. And ground continually subject to eruptions never feels quite safe; there are frequent little tremors; one begins instinctively to walk with a wary tread that is not natural.

Having, like Arnie, nothing better to do, she betook herself to the links. But, unlike that Adonis, she did not "potter"; she played strenuous golf—though usually alone. Beyond Miss Dunne and Miss Blake—too inseparable to need further companionship—nobody took notice of new members at the West Cuvingham Golf Club. Leo sought the game, not the social standing of her partners. If one stratum were unobtainable, she was quite content with another. And—as Arnie often bewailed—the golf club was "rather mixed." When Leo was seen putting on the fourth green with a son of the local publican, the stratum of The Towers sank under a heavy fall of verbal leaves. The Merleys would never call *now*. . . . Mrs. Hawkes wished she

hadn't. . . . Freda Dawes refused an invitation to tea. For really you didn't know whom you might meet there. . . . Mr. Wood, whose second assistance to this world consisted in telling one half what the other half said and did, dropped a casual word to Wallis. He loathed Wallis—"One of these upstarts, you know"—with the natural loathing of one who inherited five hundred pounds per annum for one who inherited a skin, and made the rest by his own enterprise.

Wallis' cold eyes met with level directness the other man's fluttering look of ill-veiled malice.

"My wife is keen on golf," was all he said in reply.

But after dinner that night, the annoyance caused by the episode overbore discretion. To him the local attitude was perfectly clear; one with which he had been contending for some years; one which he had conquered time after time, while rising from one rung to the next on the social ladder. That a wife capable of completing the climb should deliberately cut away the rungs was not to be endured.

"You don't tell me nowadays with whom you play golf," he said, when they were alone with the dessert.

"You don't ask me nowadays," she flashed back, without looking up from cracking nuts. These are the big little things that count in married life; but the thrust was ill-timed. Its truth annoyed Wallis yet more—so much that he did not pause for strategy.

"Well," he exclaimed, with unusual heat, "I object to your playing with the village tradesmen."

"Tradesmen? I don't understand. Aren't we in trade? Isn't practically everybody about here——"

He waved aside the remark with a little impatient gesture she knew well: "You are merely splitting straws. You know that—difference exists."

Leo's quick temper began to rise. She tossed back a wave of hair from her left eyebrow, and met his look fully.

One quick flash—rapier to rapier—passed between them; then Leo bent over her nuts. "Please explain," she said with ominous quietness. "Probably I am dense, but really I fail to see your drift."

He poured out a glass of port, and set down the decanter with a bump of decision. Defiance in a wife was the last thing he meant to countenance—the last thing he expected to meet again after the night at the casino.

"I mean," he said deliberately, "that I can not—*will* not —allow golf with the local publican's sons."

"Whew! Won't you really, Harry? It does sound scandalous, doesn't it? But why do you tell me this?"

"Why——" He paused, frowning. For an instant he wondered if Wood had been mistaken. A glimmer of understanding dawned on Leo. "I played with a strange young man the other day, who was alone, like myself. Would he be a—a—'local publican's son'?"

Harry's frown deepened. "You surely don't just pick up any fellow who happens to be on the links? Without any introduction? Really, Leo, that's—I can't allow that. It's—preposterous——"

"Rubbish!" She forced a laugh, but her trembling fingers allowed two nuts to fall on the table and roll to the ground. "Why is everybody so stiff? And this kind of talk —in these democratic days—is—is ridiculous. Would you have me a snob? A—a prude? A—a——" Threatened by a choke, she broke off, biting her lips angrily.

"I would have you conform to natural conventions. In fact, I insist upon it."

The rider was unfortunate. To prove possessive rights through love is one thing, to assert them in cold blood is quite another. Furious, and strangely frightened, as an unbroken colt that feels the shackles closing his freedom, Leo sprang to her feet.

"Insist? Insist?" She faced him, her breast heaving, her eyes blazing. "How dare you talk like that to me? And—and—how dare you listen to things about me?"

"'Listen'? I——"

"You must have listened to somebody's tittle-tattle, or how would you know with whom I play golf? You never take sufficient interest to ask me. It's—I didn't think *you—you*—oh, it's horrible——"

An idiotic sob—that plague of womanhood—caused her to turn hastily to the nearest door. But he was before her, barring it with outstretched arm.

"You misunderstand," he said quietly. "Somebody remarked—quite casually—that he had seen you playing with Tom Dickson, whose father keeps the Bottreux Arms. Naturally I felt annoyed."

"I don't see why."

The irritable lines hardened his mouth again. "Then you are singularly dense."

"I think——" She paused; then looked straight into his face. "I think you are becoming a snob, Harry. It is easy here, where everybody goes on stilts. If you had been to the war, you would have realized the—*littleness* of such things."

Her voice faltered into a deathly silence that lasted for a full minute. Wallis turned a little pale round the eyes, which had something in them Leo dared not meet. . . . Still without a word, he opened the door at last for her to pass through. With burning cheeks and smarting eyes, but head held high, she hurried across the hall to her own sitting-room. Switching off the light, she threw herself down upon a big couch by the fire, and buried her face in the cushions. There seemed to be something—some suspended sword—whose cold steel she dared not look upon. . . .

For what might have been hours she lay there, torn be-

tween anger, fear and remorse. Harry's reticence over the reasons which kept him from the war zone had never been pierced. This had rankled with Leo, used to those who gave up and risked their all. But there was that about Harry which forbade interference. He was reserved to a fault.

Impulsive speech is a doorway of the subconscious mind. Until the words came, unbidden, to her lips, she had not realized the extent of this secret rankling. Now she would have given much to recall them. The anger melted, leaving only remorse and the grim specter whose name was fear.

She had laughingly called marriage a respectable institution, which she would enter when tired of other pursuits. This was "respectability"—this conformity to absurd little conventions, this snobbery! Val had thought some people ought never to marry. . .. . She pulled up her galloping thoughts with a quick rein. Life had begun to assume the nature of a perilous adventure, upon which she was but a frail bark entrusted to another to pilot. If either failed the other where would the winds and waves carry them? The bark could not reach land without conforming to the pilot; the pilot must consider the bark. However divergent, their points of view must be adjusted in some fashion so as to breast the waves. . . .

The fire burned low, but she lay on in the semi-darkness. Unconsciously part of the inconsequence—that which Val termed "sprite"—fell away to-night. Fear stepped into its place.

It was midnight when Wallis left his study and went upstairs. Finding Leo's room empty, he went down again to her sitting-room. There, the gleam of a white frock was visible in the light from the hall. He closed the door and came quickly across to the back of the couch.

"Why haven't you gone to bed?" he asked gently.

"I—forgot to go," she replied truthfully, her heart rising

at the change in his voice and manner. "I have been nearly asleep here." An involuntary shiver caused him to lean over the couch's back and take her hands.

"You are cold, Leo."

"Yes. Cold outside and in—chiefly *in*, since dinner——"

"Ah! My dear——" He came round the couch and seated himself on the edge. Bending over her, he half lifted her into his arms. "My Leonore!" he whispered.

She clung to him almost fiercely, and the specter faded into the surrounding gloom, though it did not go quite away.

"Harry—Harry!" she muttered. "We must never—*let go*—you and I!"

He smoothed the hair back from her brow and kissed her lips.

"Not likely! I have been thinking—too—to-night, Leo." He paused, and played with her fingers in an embarrassed manner. "It's lonely for you. I—will you teach me to play golf? At week-ends?"

In the faint firelight he saw the radiance that overspread her face. "Really? You really mean it? Oh—Harry! That will be delightful." The grim specter drew farther away in the shadows. This would mean sharing each other's life—it would thwart the drifting of the bark. . . .

"The fresh air and exercise will be so good for you," she continued, in a new motherly tone whose quaintness brought a smile to his lips. Privately he expected the game to bore him stiff, but he forebore to say so.

Harry was too just a man to let the past scene go by without investigation. He had sat alone since dinner, pondering upon its occurrence. With perhaps a little envy he had partly understood the reason of their divergent opinions upon these small matters that to him were giants, to Leo gnats. At the same time he failed to understand her inconsequence—was, in fact, afraid of it. As far as he conceived

it possible, she had shared his business interests. It behooved him to share hers, to protect her against herself, if need be. To a man whose work and ambitions formed the boundary line of his existence, this entailed sacrifice. Games had not appealed to one whose youth had offered no opportunities for their indulgence. Riding had proved his chief recreation: helping a farmer uncle to break in horses, occasionally following hounds with those being trained for hunters. To-night a new resolve formed in his mind.

"I am going to buy some horses," he remarked unexpectedly.

"Horses?"

"Yes. We can get some hunting."

"My dear Harry! I should fall off at every ditch. I have never ridden in my life."

"I will teach you. Will you see about a habit——"

"Breeches," she interrupted promptly. "No side-saddle and habit for me. I'll ride astride."

"I don't think women about here ride astride," he suggested tentatively. His high-handed manner at dinner having brought disaster, the power of suggestion seemed more tactful.

"All the better," she replied unconcernedly. "We don't want to run with the ruck in everything—that's so dull, isn't it?"

He was silent for a space, conscious again of their divergent points of view. To fall in with surrounding conventions, to hold a stable and respected position among them, formed his aim; to set them at naught, to defy them, appeared to be hers. She seemed wholly lacking in his sensitiveness to the world's opinion, as he viewed the world. Thus divided against itself, how could any edifice stand?

He played with the fingers of the hand he held, somewhat absently. "Leo"—and she wondered at the diffidence

in his voice—"I don't want to sound harsh or—priggish. But—my dear—I think, sometimes, you forget you are a married woman."

"Oh, Harry!"

"No, don't laugh; I mean this. I know your life has been exceptionally free for a girl—almost that of a boy. But now, you know—well—there is a certain position to keep up, responsibilities to be shared——"

"Your head in the noose"—the words came to Leo, hit her as a blow. Again a Swiss pine wood and a vivid laughing face rose before her eyes, and again she beat them back. Why did Val and his words so often haunt her nowadays?

She drew a little away from her husband, and her fingers became limp in his.

"You take things rather heavily sometimes, Harry. Most people do about here, I have noticed. So perhaps it is the neighborhood. Shall we go to bed?"

"Leo, you must not take offense whenever I speak about these matters. After all—I'm your husband."

"But I'm not your—chattel. This is the twentieth century. Harry, dear"—she clutched his hand, as he drew it away—"oh, where are we? What is the matter with us nowadays? I'm—I feel scared."

At once his rigidity relaxed. He drew her close again.

"There's nothing to be scared about. We love each other—that will carry us through."

"Through what?"

"Oh—differences. Our outlook on life must be different. We knew that when we married. I hid nothing from you."

Again the simplicity that formed some of the chief greatness of this man won through all differences and barriers. She drew his hand up to her cheek, and pressed it there.

"And," he continued gently, "there will probably be chil-

dren—later on—won't there, Leo? You will see things differently then."

" . . . And if the noose strangles you?" Again that phantom voice spoke from the darkness into her heart.

"Do you want children, Harry?" she asked tonelessly, laying down his hand.

"Of course! A son to carry on the business—don't you?"

"Not particularly. Ah!"—as he gave a little start—"don't loose me because of that! Harry—we mustn't let go. . . . I have never had the craving for—for domestic life—babies—all that, which is supposed to be *womanly*. Personally, I think, often it's only a pose. My husband—companionship—your love, Harry, is all I want. What does every little convention—the opinions of little people—matter? Love is such a much bigger thing. Isn't it? Don't get discontented——"

"Discontented? Darling! Whatever made you dream of such a thing?" He kissed her again and again, with all his old intensity. "I must have expressed myself clumsily. You—you must make allowances. But—discontented? *Never!*"

He believed what he said, and Leo believed it too. The specter and the phantom voices were, for the present, laid to rest.

CHAPTER IX

MISS ROSALIND BLAKE and Miss Caroline Dunne lived in extraordinary modesty—speaking locally—at The Cottage. They possessed no motor-car to prove their respectability; no money or rank to prove their social value; no young man to attract the girls and widows; no youth or beauty of their own to attract the men. Therefore they were not considered worth considering. Frankly over fifty, the fact failed to upset their digestions. Owing to a more practical domestic nature and pince-nez, Miss Blake gave the erroneous impression of being the elder. She was also of smaller build, less robust, and so accustomed to fatigue after exertion that it had become a habit. After a round of golf, she went home to lie down. Refreshed by a nap, she settled into a chair and knitted jumpers all evening until, again sleepy, she went to bed. While knitting she discussed the doings of the Royal Family, the Aristocracy, and the Stage.

Caroline, on the other hand, tramped round the links rather fiercely, muttering thunderously over bad lies, the thunder breaking into loud claps when brooks or bunkers caught her ball. Caroline was very explosive—a kind of semi-active, semi-dormant volcano. She usually returned home in eruption over some matter or—more often—person, and lava flowed around The Cottage for an hour or so. Then, with diminishing rumbles, and spurts of flame or smoke, the volcano died down without doing any damage. Caroline decided to write a book some day, and put every-

body who annoyed her into it, as Dante is said to have put his enemies into his *Inferno*.

Leo found this pair of spinsters easier of approach and comprehension than the dwellers in marble halls. Frequently, after her little shocks, she turned to them. Here she could find golf and companionship—not saturated with Susie's domesticity—that would not annoy Harry. Leo, the elusive and inconsequent, had reached that mile-stone in life: she sought not to annoy another. While driving her car to The Cottage, the morning after their little scene, she reviewed the situation dispassionately.

The country about Cuvingham is pretty in a quiet conventional way. Green and pink fields, highly cultivated, undulate softly, interspersed with fine old trees. The trees are the chief beauty; the lack of water the chief drawback. It is all very much preserved. "Trespassers will be prosecuted" disperses the romance of a woodland glade—the eye never passes beyond that notice. And the same notice, unwritten, disperses the sense of life's bigness and infinity when read in the eyes and voices of the inhabitants. A feeling of uneventfulness—of seasonable regularity—dominates the countryside. And the note seemed, to Leo, to dominate the souls of the people. They preferred a groove. No turbulent rivers carried them away to the far horizons of sea-swept shores.

Here and there, a relief to the fields, stretches a small common where blackberry bushes abound, and sometimes a little heather, or gorse, or bracken. Near one of these Leo stopped the car, climbed the gate, and surrendered herself to her thoughts.

Between the episode of the library and last night several strange little scenes similar to the first had taken place. Each had puzzled, or annoyed, or distressed her, at the moment; each had been swept away by Harry, leaving no con-

scious impression behind. Last night witnessed the first approach to a real quarrel, the first passage of bitter or angry words. And again, now, no conscious impression—no anger or sense of disillusion had been left. Why was this, she wondered? Why could she take from this man what would have heaped up scorn, alienated her, from any other? Why had she given him herself so freely—not only her body but her will—time upon time? One glance, a pressure of his hand, the warm strength of his arm, and all her own personality wavered, merged into his. Yet in mind, in spirit, in all the things that had seemed of so much greater import than the physical side of love, how far were they sundered? That she had never yet discovered. Harry's mind proved a sealed book, of which but a page turned now and then. And her own? What had become of all the old ecstasies, the ideals? In a man's arms had they vanished into dust—all those things she had thought so real? A hot flush crept over her face. Did this prove the physical—the material—to be, after all, the most real? Val had said they were one. Leo smiled, a trifle sadly, at this old idealism. They were not one. In her life they would be ever sharply divided. Furthermore, these old idealisms, with Val himself, had no part in her new life. Should they be allowed re-admittance. . . . A chilly November wind blew round her head, followed by a squall of rain. As if glad of excuse, she sprang down, deliberately turning from the completion of her last thoughts. Her feet and hands were clammy.

Miss Dunne, inclined to plumpness, had lately started on a diet advertised to reduce weight within three months. She was eating her nuts when Leo arrived—"No breakfast, nuts at 11" being the menu for this morning. A bright fire and a glass of wine warmed Leo's chilled limbs, while she listened to the announcement of the birth of a son to some member of the aristocracy of whom she had never heard.

"That's their third in four years," Miss Blake added confidentially, laying down the paper.

"Well! What do people expect if they get married?"—Miss Caroline's anti-matrimonial views were well known.

Leo laughed. "Tell me, Miss Dunne—aren't the people about here rather—heavily married?—glued?"

Caroline nodded vigorously. "That expresses it neatly! When I look round upon their smug stuffiness, I feel inclined to go off with a man."

"My dear Carrie!" ejaculated Rosalind. "Please don't! But what man?"

"Any man." Carrie cracked a nut viciously. "The grocer—the vicar—Tom Dickson——"

"I played golf with him, one day," Leo interrupted, with a stab of memory.

"So we heard." Rosalind smiled knowingly. "That's the butcher's knock. What shall I order for next week, Carrie?"

"Let me look at my diet sheet. . . . Monday: one banana, a few dates—fish. . . . Tuesday: a rusk—mussels. No meat for me until six-thirty on Wednesday. Please yourself, Rosy. . . . Yes, we heard about your game with Dickson."

"Lord—everybody seems to have heard!" Leo cried.

"Of course. You have only to sneeze for the news to fly round this hole. Freda Dawes told us; Arnold Kerry told her; Mr. Wood told him."

Rosalind returned just then, carrying a weekly illustrated journal.

"Here is the paper Katie sent this morning, Carrie. You wished to see the picture of that singer——"

Caroline seized it eagerly. "Miss Blake's cousin and his wife were in Switzerland this summer——"

"Switzerland!" The glass Leo was raising to her lips seemed to jump; she set it down hurriedly.

"And she dropped across a pretty little scandal that has not become public—*yet,*" continued Caroline, smacking her lips and poring over the paper. "He's very good-looking—positively beautiful, the young devil! Enough to fascinate any girl who is fool enough to——"

"He was staying with a girl at the same hotel as my cousin," explained Miss Blake. "And he's married—lives apart from his wife. They left before Katie came downstairs the morning after her arrival. I suppose they dared not face English people."

Leo's voice, after eluding her through several attempts, returned. "Is—was she sure—sure they were—living together there?"

"Oh, yes. She saw them in the same room."

Mechanically Leo took the journal held toward her. For a moment she saw nothing but a dark patch and a blur of print. Then, bracing herself as if for a leap, she looked deliberately at the pictured face. And a strange sensation swept across her—a sensation akin to homesickness. After long exile, something vital within her soul—so it seemed—recognized the landmarks of home and clamored to return there. Tumultuously the past, before the night on the Scheidegg Pass, flooded her mind, blotting out temporarily the little room and its occupants.

"Mr. Richard Valyran, the well-known young tenor, whose tour in South Africa is rivaling in success his tour in America." . . . She read the short paragraph through twice, then gazed again into the moody beautiful eyes; at the mobile lips and the strange ethereality of brow that even a press photograph could not hide.

All the bitterness had vanished from her heart as if it had never existed. "I understand—Val, I understand——" Something within uttered the words so clearly that she started, half-fearing they had been said aloud.

"I—I have heard him sing. This is very like him." She had forced out any remark that came to cover her absorption.

"If there is a divorce," remarked Rosalind, "and my cousins have to bear witness——"

"Divorce!" The paper slipped from Leo's hands to the floor.

"We shall go to court with them and hear it."

"But how could there be a divorce? I—I mean——" Leo stooped to pick up the paper. "People go about together often. That—that's no proof. Besides, his wife wouldn't divorce him unless she found somebody—so I have heard. I met him—during the war."

"*Really?* You actually know him?" Their four eyes almost dropped out of their two heads at thus being brought in touch with people behind the scenes.

"When Katie—my cousin-in-law—comes again, you must meet her," cried Rosalind, "and hear all about it."

"When is she likely to come?" Leo asked rather huskily.

"After Christmas. They are in the south of France now. She didn't like Switzerland, because German was talked so much there. Katie is very patriotic. She won't sit in the same railway carriage with a Hun."

"I always make a point of being polite to Germans, when we are abroad," remarked Caroline. "It would be terrible if we brought on the war again. Oh, must you go, Mrs. Wallis?"

Leo had risen, feeling she could bear no more. She had come with the intention of fixing up some golf; but she made hurried adieux and departed, without giving golf a thought.

Conscious of nothing beyond impotent anger, she drove at reckless speed down narrow lanes and round sharp corners.

"Cats!" she muttered. "Cats! . . . Cats!"

Yet she knew this to be unjust. At heart Miss Blake and Miss Dunne were kindly disposed. They had but expressed the average point of view. Average minds love to discover sooty specks in others to enhance their own cleanliness. And average minds, lacking imagination, do not pause to differentiate between soot and shadow. Leo's anger, however, instead of being directed upon the malice of the world in general, was purely on account of the slur cast upon Valyran. Yet that slur was not altogether unmerited. Only her purity had prevented its being fully merited. But bitter though her own anger had been, calumny from others proved unbearable. A wild desire possessed her to flout these lies in everybody's face and confound them with the truth. But during the past three months new and not very flattering impressions of human nature had been stamped upon Leo's impressionable mind. She had seen the shadow of disappointment dull the pleased glitter of eyes shining over malicious inference, when the inference was contradicted. Given opportunity she and Val would be seized upon, as a luscious bone by hungry dogs, until the last vestige of meat had been wrested from their reputation. Who would understand, much less believe, their friendship? Who would *want* to understand or believe?

And Harry? . . . Three months ago, had the subject not been too painful, Leo could have talked freely to Harry about Val. Only the horror of disillusion, coinciding with Harry's bitterness over his sister, had prevented her doing so before their marriage. Now, however, she felt she could not. There were curious jagged rocks in his nature against which she bumped unexpectedly. Already these had caused too many small misunderstandings. Last night's scene had shaken her confidence. She dared no longer walk roughshod, trusting in her own point of view. She picked her way warily, conscious that their footsteps must be adjusted.

Nevertheless, a sudden curiosity over his views caused her to turn the car into the Cuvingham road and drive to the nearest news agent's, where she bought a copy of Miss Blake's journal.

It being Saturday, Harry returned home for lunch. Over their coffee by the fire in the big hall, Leo turned the pages of her paper, then handed it to her husband.

"I know that man—met him in the Army," she said with forced carelessness.

He glanced at the photograph without much interest.

"A singer?" he observed, in the tone of one inferring "a freak."

"He is married, but separated from his wife." She watched the slight curl of Harry's lip, and her heart sank. "Miss Blake's cousin saw him in—abroad with a girl at the same hotel. Miss Blake thinks it—it is a scandal. But why? They were—probably—only friends."

Harry laid down the paper with a laugh. "*Most* probably!" he said, with biting sarcasm. "It is the kind of—friendly action I associate with actors and their ilk."

Leo knew the cause of this bias. Nevertheless, a shadow of her previous anger urged her to protest. "You are not quite fair, Harry, to judge all by—by one. This man was—I liked him. I feel sure he was——"

"Trotting abroad with—only a friend? Eh?" Laying down his cup, he rose with another laugh. "You have the most unsuspicious mind of anybody I know, Leo!" For a moment, as he passed her chair, he drew her head back against his chest and smiled fondly into her grave eyes. "It's refreshing. You strange little idealist! . . . Now—shall we take the dogs for a run?"

"I thought you wished to learn golf?"

"I haven't any clothes or clubs, yet."

"Clothes?" She glanced at him in some perplexity. But

he had shouted "Walk!" to the sleeping dogs, and her words were lost in pandemonium.

The afternoon was dull and cold, with the drab raw dreariness usual to the neighborhood in winter. No sea or moorland breezes swept, with the tang of salt or peat, across these softly undulating fields. Winds were bitter, deadly things, that often gathered the smoke from factory furnaces and carried it along in their trail. It occurred to Leo, when they left the house, that she had not seen the wide blue heavens for a long time. They seemed far away, hidden behind a dun-colored pall. The events of the past twenty-hour hours had worked her up into a state of unnatural irritation. For once Harry's unexpected caress had lost its charm in the impatience caused by his words. She was becoming tired of the ridiculous power hidden in *little things.* Longing for something big—some limitless expanse of view—she glanced round disconsolately. Like walls of a room, each little view was closed in by trees and hedges. Perhaps, she thought, these natural limits helped to explain the terrific localism of the people. Localism is an insidious, enveloping garment from the folds of which escape may prove impossible. Leo felt its fringe brush around them both, when Harry remarked that he had promised to stand for the next County Council election. Holding up one hand, she ticked off the fingers with her walking-stick.

"You are already a magistrate, a member of the District Council, and of the Parish Council, a churchwarden—oh, Harry! you are digging yourself in."

He laughed at the expression, so diametrically opposed to his own ideas. "Just the reverse, dear. I am getting out; proving by each fresh step that freedom of individuality can triumph over circumstance."

Leo understood the exultant note in his voice. "Yes," she agreed slowly, "I know what you mean. But—isn't

there a danger of getting buried among new ones? One can be trapped without being aware of the fact. I'm rather afraid of that."

"I know you are," he said, holding out a hand to help her over a stile. "You are afraid of responsibility, Leo. But you must face it." He placed both hands on the top bar, and for a fleeting instant, she felt imprisoned. "Your responsibilities are here, too, now. I want you to join in parochial affairs; to take——"

She brushed aside his arm, and took a flying leap from the top of the stile. "Harry, I'm not—not *made* that way. Hello! Who is this?"

A motor-car stood, with open bonnet, in the lane they entered. The owner raised himself from his investigation of the engine at their approach, and came forward to Wallis with outstretched hand. He was big, with heavy features and small eyes, which scarcely glanced at Leo during their brief introduction. Drawing Wallis to the open engine, he plunged into conversation, ignoring the rest of the world. On the far side of the car, his wife stood watching him, a child in her arms. Two more children were playing about. For a moment the woman glanced at Leo, then away again.

Leo looked at the broad back turned toward her, and frowned. "Churl!" she thought irritably. "Why doesn't he introduce his wife? How mad she must feel!" She took a step toward the other woman; but the cold stare she received caused her to halt. Certainly, if hostility were to be the watchword, it should be obeyed. "But what *is* the matter with the people?" thought the girl, for the hundredth time since Susie's tea-party. Had she been convicted of some crime she could not have felt more ostracized. She failed to understand the class of man whose courtesy to woman is but an afterthought—if a thought at all.

With rising anger she stepped deliberately forward into

Harry's line of vision. But both men were engrossed in some technical detail of a new carburetor. The stranger glanced at her rather impatiently; then edged around so that she was again faced only by his hulking back.

A spasm of real anger reddened her cheeks. If this insulting rudeness to their wives seemed natural to Harry too, he should be undeceived. Turning on her heel, she walked back to the stile, sprang lightly over, and, paying no heed to the call of her name, hurried across the fields.

Harry caught her up near the garden gate.

"What on earth's the matter?" he called. "Aren't you well, Leo? Why did you go off like that?"

She turned round, her hand on the gate. "Who was that—that—*person?*" she flared.

"What? Who? Do you mean Tellaman?" Harry gazed in bewilderment at her flashing eyes. "He belongs to those steel works in Cuving——"

"I don't care what he belongs to. I have never felt so insulted, so—so——" She choked in her rage. "And his wife, too——"

"My dear girl, what d'you mean? Who insulted you?"

"You mean to say you didn't see—didn't realize? Is that the—usual way these—so-called 'gentlemen' behave to their wives? Not even bare respect? Not—not the very rudiments of manners? Oh, my God! In what—what gutter has everybody been dragged up?"

Directly the words were out, she understood their full import. He drew back as if stung. The look she had not dared to meet last night flashed into his eyes, followed by a quick look of pain. Impulsively she stretched out her hand.

"Harry—Harry! I—oh! I didn't mean——"

He ignored the hand. Stepping forward, he held open the gate as, last night, he had held open the dining-room

door, for her to pass through. She looked up at him appealingly; but her own eyes wavered before the coldness they encountered.

"You had better go in; it's beginning to rain. Please do not allude to this matter again," was all he said.

In silence, mortified, yet rebellious, she passed up the garden path. Words uttered long ago dinned into her brain: "There is a great gulf that can never be bridged."

"It shall—it shall!" cried her heart. Then, alone in her room, she clasped her hands in sudden fear. "It *must.* Ah, it *must,* it *must!*"

CHAPTER X

AGAIN a small screw proved its disproportionate effect. Both Leo and Harry were conscious, after that Saturday afternoon, of a sense of strain. Try as they might, they could not bring back the old note into their intercourse. The demeanor of each held a subtle difference which the other quickly realized. After being one for so long they seemed suddenly to have become two people: very fond, united by mutual attraction, but nevertheless—*two*. Furthermore, below that attraction, they had discovered a thin layer of ice incapable of bearing the weight of two. Aware of this, both became unduly conscious in an effort to avoid it. Self-consciousness sounds the death-knell to passion. With the waning of the passion that had bound them so suddenly and tumultuously together, a hollow feeling of emptiness frightened Leo. She had, as it were, taken a step forward into a gulf covered with flowering briars. And hastily she withdrew her foot, searching feverishly for any branch capable of swinging across to the other side.

Harry himself provided the first branch by carrying out his resolve to buy horses. But she reached the branch through the briars of another unpleasant little scene. When, one morning, she announced her resolve to go up to town for a night, to see about riding-kit, Harry looked up hurriedly from his letters.

"I can't possibly get away this week. Can't you leave it until next? I can take you one day toward the end of next week."

"My dear Harry! I don't need to be 'taken'! I know my way about London blindfolded."

But her laughter fled when, rather peremptorily, he forbade the jaunt. "I don't like it—now. Young married women about here don't dash off to London by themselves."

Leo flared up at this. "Damn the 'young married women about here'! After the war, too! Did they spend it in cotton-wool? It's absurd. Of course I shall go."

"No, Leo."

"*Yes,* Harry. And I shall stay for a month, if you are so ridiculous."

Harry set his lips and stared at his plate.

"Everybody here ought to be in the Ark," she fired a last shot.

"Thanks," he observed dryly.

Leo went to London by the first train she could catch. She engaged a room at their usual hotel, and set forth upon her shopping. As the day wore on her spirits sank lower and lower. With the dusk she hurried back to the hotel, cancelled her room, and caught a train for Cuvingham; then took a taxi out to Willerton. It was long past ten. Harry sat alone in his study, when she appeared in the doorway. She ran across the room and impulsively flung her arm round his neck.

"I couldn't *bear it* without you! I was so *homesick.* I had to come back!" she cried, between tears and laughter.

The light she loved to see and had missed of late, illumined his face. He picked her up and carried her to his big armchair. . . .

When she appeared for her first riding-lesson, her slender limbs clad in neat breeches and coat, the shining waves of short hair only partly concealed by a dark brown cap, his eyes lit up with admiration; but, for a moment, his heart misgave him. She looked so young, so irresponsible.

Would this boyish figure ever evolve into the dignified châtelaine destined to become a leader of local society? For the first time he felt the incongruity between his ambitions and his wife. And for the first time he fully realized her unconquerable independence of will. No words would ever master it. His hint over not riding astride had been completely ignored. A few weeks ago—before that memorable Saturday—he would have insisted upon this. Now, however, he held his peace. It was, after all, a small matter. . . . When Leo took the bit entirely between her teeth, as she had done over London, love sent her flying back to his arms. Harry had no misgivings. . . .

She looked up from fondling the soft nose of her new bay mare.

"I am bribing her with plenty of sugar. Now she ought to behave nicely."

"You shouldn't bribe. You must teach her you are master," Harry replied, helping her to mount.

"That's not tactful. Oh! she's moving!—Stand still, for heaven's sake!—Not at all tactful, Harry. Guide by love, not by—— Why is she shaking her head? Don't loose me. Oh! I think I'll get down again—quick——"

"No—no—no!" Laughing, he tried vainly to unclasp the arms she had thrown around her horse's neck. "Let go, Leo."

"I daren't—she's shaking her head again."

"Of course she'll shake her head! She's not made of wood."

A shriek interrupted him. "Oh—I wish she were—Harry! Was that a buck?"

He glanced at the groom's convulsed face, and forced his own into gravity, resolutely pushing Leo back into the saddle. "No; she only lifted a hind leg. The poor soul must, if she's to walk at all. Now—hold your reins like this." . . .

With one eye fixed anxiously upon her animal's ears, Leo listened with scant attention to instructions. Harry swung himself into the saddle of his own black mount.

"Come along," he said. "What's the matter now?"

"Her right ear keeps twitching. What's that a sign of?"

"A fly—in summer."

"But it's winter—Harry, you are not taking me out of the yard? No—no——"

"We can't spend the afternoon walking round the yard! Loose the bridle, Evans. Now, Leo, let her follow me. She's quiet as a lamb, and perfectly steady."

"But I'm not," Leo gasped, wabbling unhappily in his wake through the big doors into the drive. "I would rather ride on a pillion and cling to you, Harry. You look so safe."

Harry waited for her to come abreast, and laid a hand on her arm to steady her. His eyes were laughing. "That's a terrible confession from a—a modern wife—to a husband still in the Ark!"

Though amusing at first, this riding did not prove an altogether successful branch. Leo, unused to horses, was nervous. Wallis knew not the meaning of the word; it made him impatient. She thought him callous, and turned to the more gentle treatment of Evans, the new groom. Although in time she gained confidence, Harry relinquished his dream of appearing in the hunting-field with a beautiful wife of perfect horsemanship. Leo flatly refused even to hunt.

"I should hate a crowd. And the poor little fox—we might kill it!"

Mr. Bonne—a terrific hunter—was present when this remark was made. He never forgot it—nor, therefore, did Willerton. Harry quite blushed with shame, for Cuvingham is situated in a hunting shire. To appear, in faultless kit, at Meets and Races is—well—to be just It. It proves, like the possession of motor-cars, that people are of real worth. In

such neighborhoods one must own cars and indulge violently in sports and games. The possession of intellect is a secondary matter—perhaps fortunately for those who are *It*. Art is quite one of the minor freaks of life.

Harry presumed Leo would not mind his hunting alone. She urged him to do so. Therefore, during the winter, he hunted about two days a week, and at night talked about the runs; and Leo attended meets and tried to listen without yawning to accounts of the runs.

This appearance in sport's most sacred local fields fulfilled his design. A wider interest in The Towers was manifested. Led by the Merleys, the pseudo-County left its bits of pasteboard. On the auspicious day of the Merleys' call Leo was out, having tea with Susie. The sight of their cards, on her return, caused no hastening of her even pulse.

"Those sticks?" She threw down the cards, with a laugh. "I shan't bother to return that—*now*."

Wallis expostulated, causing one of the many tiny scenes which, apparently the merest cracks, ever made the ominous gulf yawn wider. A mountain climber can not afford to trifle with any jutting crag that may help him up, which, if not used aright, may also let him down. Etiquette, to Harry, was too new a science to be disregarded.

"Their very appearance bores me! Why must I not cause offense?" Leo argued. "I've never seen anything so funny—and ugly—as the Canary at a meet. The pink of his coat clashes with the red streaks in his face on a cold day. And he *is* so pleased with himself. Poor little Dicky."

"He's a finely built man," championed Harry, irritated by this disrespect to the sacred name of Merley.

"In physical size, yes. Quite a bulk!"

Harry impatiently tapped the fire-irons with his toe, and they fell with a clatter on the hearth. "Well. . . . Look here, Leo—I insist upon your returning their call."

"Rats! Why? . . . Oh, don't look at me like that! Sooner than that I will hug ten families of Merley to my bosom."

The entire family was, most annoyingly, at home, when she paid this call. The Canary being actually on the doorstep, she could not escape. He extended a limp hand, and barked a few brainy remarks about the weather, while piloting her to the room where tea was in progress. Several hunting friends were staying in the house. Silence fell, with its customary and appalling suddenness, when Leo entered. But when, trying to appear unconscious of the roomful of cold eyes, she was seated with a cup of tea, conversation burst forth again with the relief of a damned-up river suddenly released. Everybody yapped in high-pitched voices about events of which Leo knew nothing—and of which they knew she knew nothing. That was a form of entertainment beloved by the Merleys. They shrieked over innuendoes and jokes which no outsider could comprehend. Now and then, perfunctorily, somebody addressed a remark to her about the weather.

A peculiar feeling of lassitude stole over Leo while she sat eating hot tea-cakes and, in enforced silence, sized up the members of the party. The sense of humor which had provoked her to hoist Arnie "with his own petard" deserted her. She felt overwhelmed, crushed, as if by another avalanche—the avalanche of self-esteem. It seemed to be the keynote to this neighborhood, which only understood success in terms of trade. In the old circles of Art or other professionalism, it had been strangely lacking, in comparison. There, a more childlike enthusiasm had bound all together in a common brotherhood, however great the differences below the surface—and in spite of jealousies. Among war-workers—all ranks herded together—had existed gay camaraderie, a spirit of "Live and let live"—with plain-speaking, open quarrels, and sporting peaces.

Here, all was different. And here, a sojourner in a strange land, she had nobody with whom she could share this difference. Seated in the Merleys' drawing-room, she realized to its full extent the spiritual misery of isolation in a crowd. And it was, she realized for the first time, symbolic of her present life. There existed nobody with whom, in the fullest sense of the word, she could *share*. . . .

Val! . . .

Quick, light and unexpected as the first flake heralding a snow-storm, the name dropped from the void—almost, it seemed, from those blue heavens that were so far away. In its trail came a whirling storm of emotions: of unutterable longing, of the strange homesickness his portrait had produced. For an instant she could almost visibly see his long limbs in the chair opposite—the whimsical little sidelong glance and smile that meant full appreciation of a situation's subtleties. And Val would have appreciated this afternoon to its utmost!

When the moment's impression faded, the renewed feeling of isolation proved unbearable. She rose precipitately to take her leave. Everybody ceased talking, and stared again until the door shut behind her. Then they began, with one accord, to sharpen their wits at her expense. The Merleys were considered very witty. Fortunately wit needs little, if any, intelligence or penetration.

A recurrence of the fury she had felt that memorable Saturday afternoon overtook Leo on the way home.

"They are the dullest, rudest—creatures!" she declared to Harry. "And I won't—I mean it—I will *not* enter their house again."

She kept her word. When, in due time, The Towers was honored by an invitation to dinner at Tullingham Hall, Leo tore the note into fragments. Not until she had posted a refusal did she mention the matter to her husband.

He was very angry. Leo had never seen him so angry before. And when thus off his guard some of the carefully acquired polish lost its shine: wore somewhat thin. Only little things—the loss, perhaps, of an H, the slur over vowels, a pointed finger—but they proved horribly big. Leo began to see another man, the man of crude raw material, beneath the surface shell. This discovery seemed the greatest shock of all the shocks previously received.

She tried to forget it, as she had tried to forget those others. She reasoned with herself: "I always knew—he never deceived me. These are only surface things . . . at least——" An uneasy suspicion that, though apparently surface, they might strike deep, with long ineradicable fangs, silenced her easy reasoning.

The scene had been extremely unpleasant. The subject had taken one of those dangerous twists into the rights of man and wife—the open question that reason alone can never solve.

"You have no right to decide these matters without consulting me."

"I have *every* right. The thing was addressed to me. These social matters *are* my business."

"Nothing is merely your business that affects me too. Besides—I'm jolly well going to be master of my own household——"

"Of—— Oh, yes! Well—I'm jolly well not going to be—just a legal mistress——"

"A—*what?*"

"Legal mistress," she flashed with extra clear enunciation. "That seems to be all some men about here expect of their wives. They only want housekeepers and—and mistresses."

"What a—an extremely vulgar remark! I wish you would curb your—the freedom of your speech. It often

places me in a very uncomfortable position when other ladies are about."

"Ladies?" The word struck her dumb for a moment. She swallowed hard, took a violent mental grip of herself, then went on in a calmer tone. "I and the—women about here have led very different lives. Blame the war for my—freedom." Then turbulent emotions swelled up again. "But—no! Thank Heaven for it! I *am* free—you can never shackle me to their leading-strings."

"My dear girl, you're *not* free; you are my wife. I shall be obliged if you will remember that—in its full significance. A wife should be a help socially to her husband—work for his success."

"And what should the husband do for the wife?"

He was momentarily staggered, and she laughed scornfully.

"That is, typically, the average man's point of view! I thought, Harry, you were—were more—advanced—finer."

"A husband provides the home, the—comforts——"

"Food and drink? Same as he would for his cows? And—do you suppose any *real woman* with intelligence is satisfied with—that?"

"Well——" Poor Harry, who had never reasoned about the matter, floundered badly. "What—more can he do?"

"More?" For a long moment she looked him full in the eyes, in her own a growing dismay which, while causing him vague uneasiness, he failed to understand. "Do you ask—that? Don't you—*understand?*" She rose abruptly and turned away; but all at once turned back, wringing her hands. "Oh, Harry, Harry! Where are we?"

He rose too, his anger chased away by uneasiness.

"Where are we?" He took her arm and pressed it lightly. "Becoming rather a bickering, old married couple! Give me a kiss, Leo, and let's be good."

She responded, and smiled; but there was none of the earlier, lover-like capitulation.

"It seems to me," she observed, with a flash of intuition, "that we both have a lot to learn yet."

"Perhaps." But his voice held the doubtful tone of a man who considered the learning necessary for one of the pair alone. . . .

Harry's golf proved a more successful branch than Leo's riding. So successful, in fact, that its original purpose was defeated. It swung Harry too far across the gulf, so that by a twisting path he returned to his original side. Being of wiry build and quick brain, he proved too brilliant a pupil for Leo, and took lessons from the professional. To his own astonishment he became so keen on the game that the hopeless disease known as "golf mania" threatened. At first he had appeared with an expensive golf-bag of the latest design, full of shining clubs, and his person clad in a tweed golf-suit of the newest pattern. The whole outfit was so perfect, from pleats and pockets to brightly colored tags dangling beside his long stockings, that Leo almost gasped. For a moment she turned away, struggling with the impulse to laugh. Then her innate loyalty came to her aid.

"Harry, dear! How awfully smart you are!" she cried. He took the odious adjective literally, as a sincere compliment from one who never paid empty compliments. She saw quick pleasure light up the usual gravity of his face.

"I am so glad you like it," he replied simply. After that Leo could say nothing. Only one loophole remained.

"But I hate those dangling things on your legs."

"Oh!" He glanced down at his calves and laughed. "Cut them off, if you would rather." And she seized a pair of scissors there and then, and snipped off the unnecessary adjuncts.

But now that the game had him in its power, clothes were a secondary consideration. All odd moments were spent upon the links, in any garment feasible to the opportunity. And for a time this branch fulfilled its mission. Golf became all-absorbing to both. It formed the diet for every meal. Leo's struggle to keep the lead in their matches caused a spirit of friendly rivalry. For once she regained a sense of comradeship with another fellow-creature—and that the one with whom she had longed for it in vain.

In another district this might have continued. But in that of Cuvingham and Willerton men were not expected to *want* to play with their own wives, unless extremely newly-wed. They did so from a sense of duty sometimes, or when no other male partner was forthcoming. Wives were encouraged to join the golf club to prevent murmurings in the home circle. They played their little games and added a touch of prettiness, in their gay jumpers. Their prattle and their ignorance of rules caused a certain amused interest. As long as they kept out of the way on the course, it was a pleasure to see them about—as it is to see bees and butterflies on a hot day. But—unless filled with cake and tea at mixed-foursome competitions—Man found his real game with Man. Realizing in Wallis a coming player, they naturally concluded he would want a *game*—not merely to potter round" with his wife. So they came to "the poor fellow's rescue." And gradually Harry seceded to the man's portion of the club-house, to their competitions, their bridge, their world-moving discussions. Naturally, therefore, the rivalry with Leo fizzled out—as did their games together. The gulf remained. . . .

Leo found a greater interest than golf. The library having been entirely "done up" in accordance with her own tastes, and stacked with books by the excellent firm employed, was now being put in order. A librarian came each

day to catalogue. To Leo, books were a real world, like music. They were life itself: the life of the mind, of the spirit, never dying, but unfolding from one generation to another. She spent long hours with the librarian, or poring alone over rare editions she had never thought to possess.

The natural result happened. The dormant side of her nature—the old spiritual, slightly mystical side—stunned in Switzerland and since then deliberately buried, stirred under the leaves and earth. Old interests, strange yearnings, faint echoes of those far-off ecstatic raptures, stole about her soul. With the same unconsciousness that Harry drifted away into club life, she drifted back toward the portals of a world wherein he had never set foot.

But again their drifting was arrested. An unexpected plank fell across the gulf, and, though quickly withdrawn, left them upon the same side. Before Christmas an amazing thing happened. Bottreux Castle, three miles from Willerton, was a real old *bona-fide* castle that had sheltered the real old *bona-fide* family of Bottreux-Barlington since the days of Adam, according to local opinion. This was a genuine County family that, like Mr. Wood, had never needed to do anything for the world it lived in, but, in every generation, had preferred to do something. No trade formed its background; therefore, in humanity's usual paradoxical way, the neighborhood whose distinction was trade rolled its tongue reverently over the very name. Sir George Bottreux-Barlington had something—nobody knew what—to do with the Government of South Africa. During his rare and brief visits to his ancestral home, competition became keen to win an entry. But the baits seldom proved effectual. The family came there to rest or to hunt, not to enter into local festivities. Even the Merleys chafed under luke-warm acknowledgments. When they did gain admittance, the atmosphere seemed strangely uncongenial.

Murmurs of "The Family's" advent reached Leo's ears and passed over them. She failed to appreciate the excitement of her maid, her housekeeper, Miss Blake and Miss Dunne. Nor did she spend her days, with Mrs. Bolten, Mrs. Kerry and other matrons, in a search for new clothes of the latest London "cut." Irreverently alluding to the name as "a jaw-twister," she retired from competition to the seclusion of the library. She was seated on the floor, surrounded by books, when Pomfrey, bristled with importance, almost holy of voice, entered the room the day after the August Arrival.

"Lady Bottreux-Barlington, ma'am," he said, a hushed expression in his eyes.

Leo looked up a little dazedly from her reading.

"Oh? Where?"

"In the lounge, ma'am." Pomfrey was too up to date for drawing-rooms.

Leo rose, closing her book reluctantly, and went to the "lounge." At the door she gave a little sigh of anticipated boredom. But this merged into a shriek, which was echoed by another, and she hurled herself across the room.

"Barley! It's never *you?*"

"Leo! You old rotter! I've run you to earth at last!"

Leo endured and returned the somewhat violent embrace. Then, freeing herself from the elder woman's capacious arms, she looked into her plain jolly face with a mystified laugh. "I entered the room prepared to be bored stiff," she owned frankly.

"I thought so. You always hid your feelings badly."

"But—Barley—you humbug! You owned a castle and a title and—the devil knows what——"

"Two kiddies, four cats and sundry dogs—oh, yes, and a husband. I couldn't bring them all into the Army. It's not done by motor-drivers, is it? So I shed the lot *pro tem.*"

"'Mrs. Barlington'—supposed to live somewhere in the Colonies—but rather vague, and always shabby—seldom ever clean. Oh, you lying old duck!" Leo kissed her again. "Let's talk every blessed thing over, Barley! The blessedness of being able to *talk!*"

She stopped rather abruptly. "Barley," after a quick look at her face, glanced round the huge room.

"I say, Leo, what magnificence! Have you married for money, you little beast? And why? When? Where?"

"Come to my own cubby-hole; it's cozier. Love, my dear, not money! You still have a vile mind, I see." . . . She led the way, laughing, to her sitting-room and rang for tea.

Under cover of the ensuing fire of reminiscences Lady Bottreux-Barlington watched the girl's face shrewdly. Not until they had nearly finished tea did Leo trouble to discover the facts leading to this meeting.

"How did you know I was me?" she exclaimed suddenly in her usual graphic phraseology.

"Val told me."

Leo's teaspoon dropped into her saucer, then rolled over and fell to the floor. "Why—where—have you seen Val?" she asked, stooping to pick it up.

"In Cape Town."

"Oh! Yes, yes—of course. And"—for some reason her voice wavered—"how was—is—Val?"

Her guest munched hot tea-cakes, gazing into the fire, her brows drawn down. Presently she gave a careless shrug.

"Singing divinely. Thin as a rake." With disconcerting abruptness she turned piercing dark eyes upon Leo. "What devil's game have you been playing with old Val?"

Leo's cheeks turned scarlet. "I—what d'you mean—what has he said?"

"Oh, scarcely a word. That's it; it's what he hasn't said. You were such splendid pals in the old days. I admired you both! Your friendship was—a beautiful thing—a rare thing."

Leo shaded her eyes. "It was," she murmured.

"Then——?" The other woman looked at her questioningly. "Val merely told me you were married. He said you never wrote to him—now. He showed me a newspaper, several months old, with the announcement. . . . Of course I had no idea you lived here, until I heard by accident this morning."

"Did Val"—Leo twisted her fingers together in her lap—"was he—did he seem—surprised?"

"'Surprised'? He—my dear——" She broke off, undecided what to say. Leo's dumbly beseeching gaze urged her on, perhaps unwisely. "I looked once into his eyes and —dared not look again."

Her words went into silence. She leaned forward. "Leo—did that friendship prove—I—see. Don't bother to tell me. . . . But—poor Val! Poor dear old Val! . . . He is so sensitive." . . .

Leo's face was again hidden by her hand. "It seemed best—not to write," she muttered huskily.

"It seems to me—downright cruelty. But, of course, I don't know all the facts. . . . Well," changing the subject in her abrupt fashion, "tell me all your present news. Is this your husband?" She leaned forward again and took a photograph from a little table, on which it stood alone. "Bring him over to dinner to-morrow, will you? We are only down for a week, with quite a musical crowd." She was looking critically at the photograph, and smiled across it at Leo. "A man with a mouth like that ought to manage even you! But I really can't, even now, contemplate *you*—married. Nearly fainted, when I heard!"

"That's the trouble, Barley."

"What? And is there trouble?"

"N-no. But I can't behave *marriedly,* if you understand? I don't seem to go down—with the Merleys and others about here."

Lady Bottreux-Barlington got up, with one of her big hearty laughs.

"For the lord's sake don't try! If you once 'go down' here you will never rise again. Now I must go. See you to-morrow, old thing. . . . Come to the door with me; your butler's severity scares me to death."

Pomfrey's eyes nearly fell from their sockets when he beheld his young mistress throw a careless arm round the Great Lady's titled neck and kiss her affectionately.

He took the news to the back regions, where it formed the topic of conversation that night, causing Ross to reconsider her oft-repeated threat to leave and "better herself." It percolated to the village next morning, and the butcher's boy decided to stop whistling and to touch his forelock to the owners of The Towers—a very special honor nowadays. By evening it had become the staple diet at every Marble Halled dinner and Geographical Supper-table in the parish.

People began "to sit up."

CHAPTER XI

HARRY'S pleasure over this visit caused Leo a variety of feelings. Surprise merged into amusement, became tinged with scorn, turned to irritation. It was, she felt, snobbery; therefore detestable. Yet Harry, the source of this snobbery, remained to her most lovable. Irritated though she might be by many skeins in his character, others never lost their charm. Leo had begun to study the art, not only of adjustment, but of transposition. Again and again, resolutely placing herself in his position, she tried to see matters from his point of view. But Harry suffered from the curse as well as the blessing of success gained throughout life by his own hand. Grappling with materialistic realities from childhood, he failed to consider other and deeper realities.

Realizing this, Leo's impatience became balanced by compassion which, in its way, was maternal. She was vaguely aware that, under the ruffled surface of her mind, new and invisible strands were being woven—strands capable of forming a rope that might bind her closer and closer; from which she could never get free.

Hating herself, she nevertheless watched Harry critically when they dined at Bottreux Castle next day. In his eyes shone the old pride and admiration which had been missing of late; but to her he seemed just a little far-off tonight. The peculiar feeling of homesickness, often present nowadays, vanished. She felt like one within sight, at least, of home lamps. And the nearer these came, the farther off seemed Harry. Quietly self-possessed as usual, he

gave no hint of the delight caused by this invitation. He appeared, too, perfectly at ease in his surroundings. Knowing now of the jarring little rocks below the calm surface, Leo marveled. After all, they were only tiny crags, she reflected—not deep cavernous cliffs. The bridging of gulfs depended entirely upon personality. . . .

Barley caught her musing glance, and waved a hand. "Don't listen, Leo! I'm telling your husband some of your sins. It's time he knew."

Esteem from an outside agency of value may work miracles of bridge-building. The unfeigned appreciation of his wife in this Holy of Holies, following upon the lack of appreciation in local society, reinstated her with renewed glamour in Harry's own estimation. Sir George found engrossing her conversation, which, Harry fancied, local men had found dull. After dinner—art connoisseur though he was—he asked for her opinion upon a picture in his collection, and carried her off to the picture-gallery.

Most of the guests were musical—one or two fairly renowned. Yet they treated Leo's opinions with respect; even encouraged them. Harry wondered over this. Frequently she was called to the piano for discussions. With shining eyes and eager voice she talked of things—used words—of which he had never heard. To his astonishment she even played herself, with a touch that evoked admiration.

"You ought to do something. . . . It's pure talent. . . . Mr. Wallis, why do you allow her to waste her time? Lock her up with a piano for six hours a day."

Leo laughed, a trifle bitterly. "*That* would be considered 'waste of time' here! Music is one of the things for which time is too valuable—unless it means money——"

She broke off, with a catch of the breath. Lady Bottreux-Barlington had seated herself at the piano and was lightly touching the keys. She smiled at Leo.

"You know it? The Fairy Song?" . . .

A tumultuous wave of the strange homesickness swept Leo away. Everything around seemed to fade into the vision of snow-capped mountains and silver lake, all glittering in moonlight and shadow. And the softly passionate tones she had loved stole forth into the night, setting their seal of perfection—

"The Lordly Ones! The Lordly Ones!"

How far, far away were the Lordly Ones now? Or was she far, far away? Without knowing why, her eyes filled with tears. She felt suddenly lost, horribly *alone,* as if half of her being had been torn off and she had just become conscious of its loss.

Val had said they were close—all around—down every river. . . .

Val . . . Val . . . Val. . . .

Independent of all conscious longing, her spirit stretched out invisible arms across the night, the dividing ocean, dark tracts of land. With sudden passionate craving, it struggled toward its companion spirit. . . .

For what did not count in time she stood, hands loosely clasped, her mind dead to all around. The light from a tall shaded lamp gilded her hair, showing her face strangely pale and tense.

The touch of Harry's hand caused her to start violently. She heard his voice, full of its old gentleness:

"You look most awfully tired, dear. Shall we go home?"

Inside the big car he put an arm around her. "What was the matter, Leo? You . . . What were the tears about?"

"Tears?" She half drew away, with a little quavering laugh. This unexpected tenderness coming so close upon that passionate longing for another, seemed incongruous.

With the suddenness of its appearance, however, the incongruity vanished. Quite a different part needed Val to the part of her which needed Harry.

Abruptly she relaxed against him, with the same cry she had uttered once before.

"Harry, we must never—*let go.*"

He kissed her and drew her close. "But you haven't told me what caused the tears?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing. . . . Merely—the music. . . . . Seeing an old friend——" She brushed the matter hastily aside. In Harry's arms all the homesickness had disappeared. "And Sir George is having a car to take back——"

"He's coming to the works to-morrow." At once Harry became the keen man of business again, childishly proud, greatly simple. With music haunting every fiber of her being, she left her hand clasped in his, and listened to his eager expectations during the rest of the drive. . . .

After this, the stratum of The Towers could soar no further; it was established upon dizzy heights. The careful people who had not honored it with invitations, quickly did so. Those who had not even called, almost ran up the drive. What they had missed this week through shortsightedness was positively galling. But who could have known? Mrs. Wallis never gave a hint that she knew the Bottreux-Barlingtons. Newcomers should really post a list of their acquaintances on their gates, stating rank, degree of intimacy, etc., etc. . . .

Leo felt amused but not deceived. A few weeks ago she would have scorned this vulgarity, as she had scorned the Merleys' and the Tellarmans' rudeness. But now, inspired by Barley's invigorating companionship and Harry's renewed tenderness, her sense of humor revived. So charming did Mrs. Hawkes find her—in spite of the unfortunate red hair—that she confided her hopes for Violet. Mrs.

Hawkes always made these confidences the moment she felt "drawn" to a person. It happened after a meet of the hounds at the Castle, at the end of "The Family's" visit. Leo, in short skirts and muddy boots, had been following on foot, taking short-cuts. Clambering over a gate she found the narrow lane blocked by Mrs. Hawkes' "saloon." Mrs. Hawkes, massive in her fur coat, sat within. She hailed Leo, insisting upon giving her a lift.

The girl looked at the priceless rugs, the spotless paint, the perfect upholstery, then at her own dirty boots.

"Afraid I'm too muddy"—she made a feeble effort to escape.

"Nonsense! Get in. I'm followin' too." Mrs. Hawkes did not mean to miss this opportunity. Who knew but that Lady Bottreux-Barlington might not appear on her gray horse and ride beside the saloon? Mrs. Kerry would see that it would be "one on" to her.

Leo, feeling like a trapped animal, could not escape without rudeness. She sank down into the car's luxurious cushions, with one longing glance over the freedom of the country, the fresh air and the sky above. Mrs. Hawkes did not like open windows.

"Violet couldn't come," she explained after a few perfunctory remarks. "She's got a touch of the 'flu, and is expectin' the doctor." She looked round with a knowing little blink. "We know what *that* means, don't we? These young people!" Her jaw sank into her furs, with a few wags intimating amusement.

"Why? What?" Leo felt mystified.

Mrs. Hawkes' head wagged in harmony with her chin as far as her short neck permitted. "I'm not saying but that 'e wouldn't be a good match." Her meaning was somewhat involved, but Leo saw daylight.

"Oh?" she exclaimed politely. "Is she—are they——

"No! Oh, no! Nothin's settled yet. Of course I could wish for better things for my Violet than a country doctor, Mrs. Wallis. But there are country doctors *and* country doctors. And of course, you know, Mrs. Wallis, 'e's got private means—oh, *he's* very well off, so I've heard, and on the *best* authority."

Leo made no remark. An income and a tendency to "settle down" in a little local groove—those appeared to be all that were needed in a husband about here. While her companion's tongue rolled on over Violet's hopes, she let her attention wander. This, she realized, was the curse of provincialism—this tendency to "settle down." With their bodies, so with their minds. No hazardous adventures, no following up of crazy ideals. Wings of thought must be clipped; sails of inspiration furled; divine discontent with its spurs, be crushed, forbidden. For the men—business; earning money for creature comforts. For the women—marriage, domesticity; the preparing of those creature comforts. The chief horizon line—the stomach. In gardens the cultivation of vegetables before flowers; in the mind, the cultivation of recipes, clothing problems, before intellect; in the soul—what? Mrs. Hawkes' voice recalled her thoughts.

"How much jam did you make this summer, Mrs. Wallis? With your big orchard you must 'ave been able to bottle hundreds of pounds too."

"I haven't an idea—at least my housekeeper told me; but I've forgotten."

Mrs. Hawkes' round eyes gazed at her again. This was an extraordinary specimen of wifehood! As Mrs. Kerry had observed, there was really nothing in her. Leo suddenly laughed. "Heathenish, isn't it? I'm afraid I quite lack this spirit of 'bottling.' I neither want to bottle fruit nor men—nor millions. . . . Look! There are the hounds! D'you mind putting me down? I can see better."

This was exactly what Mrs. Hawkes did mind. But Leo opened the door, when the car slowed down, and sprang out, deaf to remonstrance.

"Lord!" she muttered, drawing in deep breaths of air. "Another five minutes would have stifled me!"

With the departure of the Bottreux-Barlingtons, The Towers shone with the luster of reflected glory. To Harry, the zenith of success seemed to have been reached. His wife had, after all, fulfilled the mission of a business man's wife. There only remained the matter of a son to carry on the business. He could have wished for more enthusiasm on Leo's part over that point. However, there was plenty of time. . . . Like many men who thus heap up future disillusionment for themselves and those unborn, he did not pause to reflect that a son might have other inclinations. . . . Might, with his own ego shaped throughout the ages, possess the initiative to carve his own career. . . . Might possess too much creative spirit to settle down into a niche already complete and gilded. . . .

Leo gave a Christmas party which, on a larger scale, insisted upon becoming a replica of Mrs. Bolten's dinner. It seemed impossible to vary local gatherings. All sank into the same mold, which was the one mold understood. *The* great social event after Christmas was the ball given by the Kerrys. They hired the Cuvingham Town Hall and a band from London. Champagne was to flow, and viands quite out of season were to be eaten. The cost was going to be something terrific.

Mr. and Mrs. Kerry had been abroad for a month this autumn. It was an occurrence so rare as to be talked about by Mrs. Kerry with bated breath. A pilgrimage to Mecca could not be more solemn, more sacred, than the procession of Mr. and Mrs. Kerry through Italy, Belgium and France. Arnie looked after the business; Bevvie was still at Oxford.

Whatever inspired Mr. Kerry to roar his way across the Channel nobody *could* think! Mrs. Kerry had sometimes expressed a wish to visit the Continent—it was done so much nowadays—"but, of course, a woman can't go without a man. Oh, yes, Miss Blake and Miss Dunne—but—poor things—they would be safe in the Sahara." Exactly why Mrs. Kerry might not be safe she left to conjecture.

Bevvie had spent Christmas with "a fellow." He came home in time for the ball. He was short, rather doughy in appearance—so Leo thought—with mouse-colored hair greased to darkness and brushed straight back. Whether she reminded him of the pantomime belle, or whether his admiration embraced her sex generally, he fell passionately in love at first sight. Directly she entered the ballroom, he said "Jove!" (Bevvie's love was always passionate like this.) Then he started—quite perceptibly—and glared, with open mouth. "Oh, but I say!—*Jove!*" This time the cry was heard by Arnie, who looked down upon his brother with amused, tired, toleration. "What? Oh!—that petticoat? Booked, my boy—Wallis' wife. Nothing in her. Wash-out."

This was the first time Bevvie's passion had poured itself upon a married woman. The idea added spice. He drew himself up and flashed a glance of defiance at Wallis. The fellow was a cold-looking dog who couldn't probably appreciate a woman. Bevvie *could*. Jove! How her hair gleamed above that white frock! What a neck! What arms! Bevvie, speechless, bowed low upon his introduction. Then he shot her his "killing" look—the one that told her his soul claimed her soul, and didn't she know it? She didn't. But, because she cared not an atom who became her partners, she promised him the four dances which he asked. To meet somebody fresh and obviously appreciative pleased Leo. She smiled upon Bevvie.

At Cuvingham, husbands and wives dance the first dance together. Leo, with her sense of rhythm, danced infectiously. It being one of the pursuits for which Harry "had had no time," each evening lately she had held a "dancing class," comprising themselves and five dogs, in the big hall.

His eyes glowed with pride as she surrendered herself to his arms. "You are looking very beautiful to-night, my Leonore," he said. And the rare unexpected compliment, with the low throb in his voice, banished again the "homesickness" that had become chronic of late. Always, in his arms, the restless craving for another ceased, hushed asleep. This craving was no bodily craving. And it did not infringe upon Harry's possession. Her spirit, which he had never tried to share, remained mateless. It had risen in revolt. It claimed its mate—cried for its mate with a turbulence that daily grew more imperative.

And Harry, guilelessly revelling in the achievement of his ambitions, made the fatal mistake of many. Binding his world by the material, in the not ignoble life of the senses, he left the life of the soul to shrivel. Glorying in the possession of the beauty that lay in his arms, he remained unaware of all that was still possessed by another—all that might have been his.

"Dance with me most of the evening, Harry," she murmured, as the music slowed down.

He smiled. "I wish I could. But I have a crowd of duty dances. And Kerry has a bridge room going. I have promised to play, later."

His words brought a chill, which rose between them like an intangible shadow. Leo drew herself free. "Here is Mrs. Kerry. How did you get on in Italy, Mrs. Kerry?"

This was much too cavalier a manner of alluding to The Procession. Mrs. Kerry loosed her clutch of Mr. Bonne's

arm, and sat down with a kind of hushed glance of reproval. Harry and Mr. Bonne drifted into the mysteries of their last bogey competition. Mr. Bonne had lost his two best balls and had been struck by somebody else's, and was dying to retail it all. . . .

"O-o-oh!" breathed the traveler; and another silence, impressive in its solemnity, ensued. She gazed at the ceiling, then back at Leo. "My *word!* A wonderful country, Mrs. Wallis. . . . Our hotel at Rome—my dear! I never could have believed foreigners cooked so well! I didn't have a trace of indigestion all the time we were there. And usually, as you know, I suffer from it so——"

"No? I didn't know."

"You didn't? Really? I thought everybody knew that. Haven't I ever told you of the operation I had nine years ago last month? When the doctors didn't sew me up properly—at least *I* didn't think they did. . . . Well, I never! I thought I'd told you. Well, it——"

Terrified of the entire operation plus nine years' accumulation of spice dished up, Leo plunged back to Italy.

"Did you go to the Sistine?"

"The Sissteeny?" Mrs. Kerry's restless eyes wrinkled in perplexity. "No. I went to a nursing home in London. It was one of the best. It cost me——"

"I meant the Sistine Chapel at Rome—in the Vatican."

"Oh, the Vatican? Oh, yes, we spent half an hour or so there, one day. But staring at all those painted ceilings gave me a headache. And, you know, gentlemen never care about that sort of thing. They don't like looking at naked statues when ladies are with them. Mr. Kerry kept getting quite uncomfortable, I could see. He liked Bruges best. That's not in Italy. It's an old town in Belgium——"

"Yes. I—I know."

"But the cooking there wasn't so good. It didn't suit

me. Those are very good pearls you are wearing, Mrs. Wallis," she bent and scrutinized Leo's neck. "H'm. . . . They must have cost Mr. Wallis a mint. . . . And I thought I had cancer coming, in the thigh, at Bruges."

"Cancer!"

"Yes. I was terribly alarmed—and the doctor hardly knew any English—here's Arnie coming—it was only a bite. . . . What d'you want, Arnie?"

Arnie ignored the petticoat that was a wash-out. He turned his back completely upon it and whispered to his mother. Presently they rose together and walked away.

Leo was becoming accustomed to these strange male habits. She had sat through a dinner at the Bonnes' a few nights ago, during which one of her neighbors never addressed a remark to her. And the devil of mischief rose in Leo and kept her silent too.

Had Arnie's neglect caused her any pangs, Bevvie more than atoned. This, Bevvie realized, was a soul transfusion (he thought those were the words), not an every-day flirtation. He had read of these spirit friendships. Now he was about to experience one. Nevertheless, a little of the material might surely be allowed admittance. During their second dance, he held Leo close up against his chest. During their third (after supper and the champagne) he led her away to a corridor with an oriel window. And there the material threatened to overwhelm Bevvie's spirit.

The night was frosty. A full moon rode high in dark sky, powdered with stars. "Isn't it wonderful?" breathed Bevvie. "Just the moon and stars—and you and I." . . .

Leo did not see much wonder in either the constellations or the company, so she made no reply. Taking this for mutual ecstasy he allowed his fingers to touch hers, on the window-sill. She drew her hand away, and looked at him quickly. He met the look with one of hurt surprise.

"I think it is a little draughty here," Leo remarked. "Isn't there a warmer room?"

Bevvie led her back to the ballroom, cursing himself for so much boldness. Such precipitancy frightened these little country girls, he reflected. They didn't quite understand "the ropes" yet. . . . And Leo, aware of the gnawing need within, the craving for "one that understands," could have shaken the youth at her side. In contrast to his sentimentality, her own genuine longing, that was the cry of her entire spiritual nature, seethed around her soul with ever-lengthening tongues of flame. They seemed to burn up all else, so that she viewed it through their glare.

This glare seemed to throw mocking shadows across the triviality of her duty dances with all the local husbands and sons. She grew bored, impatient, restless. About twenty times she agreed that snow might fall; that, if frost came, the ground would be hard and hunting stopped; that the past rains had made the links wet; that the nights were dark. With sleepy amusement she watched Arnie's peregrinations with his four partners, and thought he resembled a long worm wabbling on its beam end, with its head swayed back; not that she remembered seeing one—before. . . . Stuffed to repletion with summer and winter dishes strangely commingled, she danced one dance after another, and listened to golfers' troubles, anglers' anecdotes, hunters hairbreadth adventures—or discussed the weather. Harry, his duty dances done, had been engulfed by the bridge room—a sacred temple of which the door was shut.

"Aren't you going to play?" Leo had asked her hostess.

Mrs. Kerry pursed her lips and shook her head. "O-oh no! Not *here!* The gentlemen don't want ladies playing *here.*"

Leo could well imagine the gentlemen did not.

This evening caused her first direct consciousness of,

metaphorically, standing alone upon a railway-station bridge and watching the passengers enter the train, or alight, bustle, talk, laugh. . . . She talked with them, exchanged views about mud and rain; then they passed on while she yet stood upon the bridge, detached, apart, watching . . . listening.

"And everything is kindly meant!" she thought. "They are meaning well—giving their best. . . . Why is it? Who is to blame?"

She glanced round the room. The young doctor's wooing—or manner of being wooed—was ludicrously phlegmatic. He sat and stared at the floor while Violet entertained him. Now and then he cast a heavy look up at her face and moved his lips slightly. Doubtless, when quite satisfied of her worth in preference to Olive's, or Olive's to hers, he would pop the question—though there would not be much "pop" about the matter. Either cork, Leo fancied, would fall plump into his hands. In another corner Tellarman sat looking unutterably bored while some poor female racked her brain for entertaining remarks.

Val had predicted the effect of an irritant upon Leo's nature. It would decide which was her real self, and throw her finally to that side. Now, alone upon her railway bridge, his remark returned to her, in answer to her queries. Was he right? Was that the reason? If so, nobody could be to blame. Only circumstances; the circumstance that places many a square peg in a round hole.

And of that real self, Val formed the complement.

A big decision resembles a subterranean stream. Through probably weeks—even months or years—it flows, hidden among the currents of the subconscious mind, until at last, perhaps suddenly, it rises in a spring of clear water, spreads into lakes and rivers, finally merging into the ocean of infinity.

Standing upon her bridge she became seized with fear —fear of being bundled into the train among the crowd who seemed to destroy her sense of proportion, to close the portals of vision.

And with the detachment, the fear; among the tongues of flame—the longing that was becoming irresistible—rose the clear spring of decision.

Her spirit no longer mutely craved its mate; it demanded. Instead of "I want" . . . it cried "I must have."

In the middle of Mr. Wood's account of a lost putt, Leo made her decision, with easy simplicity:

"I will write to Val. . . . Why not?"

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

THE top of a pinnacle is an insecure resting-place. Especially so when reached accidentally. Like a greasy pole, it needs clutching with both hands while secure notches are vainly sought for slipping feet.

Wallis, on top of this social pinnacle, was prepared to sit there for ever. Leo did not even wish to hold on with her hands.

Had the reflected glory from Bottreux Castle shone sooner, she might have felt differently. Had the local world grasped her warmly by the hand during those precarious days when the first glamour of marriage wore thin, she might have found a niche therein. But it had not. And, like waves reacting, the backwash of the material caused the influx of the spiritual. Those hours of loneliness among her books, followed by the week's intercourse with Barley amid the congenial atmosphere of Art, had raised the bridge on which she stood apart, conscious of detachment from the life around. It was no spirit of aloofness. But the result was inevitable.

"Stiff," "Stand-offish," "Snob," were the epithets used by those whose vocabulary, unsustained by imagination, grew flabby with such words—they embraced all who failed to give satisfaction. The neighborhood felt shut out, kept at a distance. Nobody gained admittance into her private strongholds. And what can be more exasperating? Personal curiosity remained unrelieved; personal remarks were often snubbed—or answered by raised eyebrows and silence.

As these were the strongest characteristics of Willerton intercourse, what wonder if Leo quickly slid down her greasy pole? She wandered round the links with Bevvie; gave parties for Harry's sake; accepted invitations—again for his sake. But, though everybody of course meant to keep a foot in The Towers now, all attempts at friendliness seemed to fizzle out like a fire that has been left too long in the camp before ignition.

Leo began to observe with more penetration of character and motive.

"There is no reserve nowadays," she remarked once to Harry, after a morning on the links listening to Violet's love-affairs and Freda's eulogy upon her own game; followed by an afternoon among Mrs. Bolten's curiosity and Mrs. Kerry's internal disorganizations. "If you don't give everything away, you are considered to have nothing to give. That Kerry woman makes me sick. She talks about such—such *ugly* things."

"This is a world of ugly facts—as I told you long ago. Haven't you realized it yet?"

"Oh, lord! *Yes!* But it ought not to be. It's wrong somehow—*wrong*. . . . It should be all beauty——"

"That's nonsense." Harry was in what she called his "heavy mood"—only just returned from business. "You are unsympathetic, Leo. Mrs. Kerry is not strong. But she is a very good wife."

"'Good wife'? Might as well say 'good horse' or 'good cow'! What a horrible remark, Harry! That's what's wrong about here—the fearful goodness. Everybody is too much married. If only somebody would elope or do something unexpected! If Arnie would carry off fat Mrs. Bonne, I should quite like him."

Harry thought such remarks flippant and in bad taste, and he said so. His previous dissatisfaction was creeping

back. Also he was becoming aware of an indefinable quality in Leo—an elusiveness that perplexed and irritated him. She seemed to be slipping away from the pinnacle he had reached, and from his own hold, into some world of her own. With everybody else, he felt himself left outside the door and possessing no key. This made him indignant. But his foolish man's pride would not allow him to ask for the key, or to try to find the door-handle.

And Leo, feeling the lack of balance between the two worlds, retreated daily more within the one that claimed her, so that the expectation of news from Val became an obsession.

She spent the entire day after the Kerrys' dance writing her letter. In the past, letters to Val were merely the outpouring of her mind to part of herself—the easiest form of composition. Now, the writing of two novels would have seemed simpler. How could she make him understand that she understood? She had promised, once, to do so. . . . How could she explain the causes resulting in this letter, when she scarcely knew them herself? When she could only feel, not diagnose? She sat and bit her pen; wrote some stilted sentences, and tore up the page; scribbled a long, passionate, scarcely coherent rigmarole over several sheets, and threw them in the fire; stared at her blotting-paper; walked about the room; began the entire cycle again. . . .

Finally, just before post-time, she seized a half-sheet in desperation, and dashed off a characteristic note:

"Val dear,—Will you forgive all, and write? I didn't understand. But I do now—loads of things. I promised to tell you. . . . Can't we go back to the old days? Our friendship was *true*, wasn't it? Write and tell me it was true—that it is still the same. I miss it so—Leo.

This she addressed, sealed and took down to the village post-office herself. The lanes were full of fog, but she

scarcely realized it. And now began the unexpected, extraordinary agitation of mind working up with swelling crescendo. She studied mails and dates, marking the day on a calendar when Val would possibly receive her letter; marking another whereon it would be possible to receive his answer. If that beautiful friendship had not been true, he would have put her out of his life, as she had once tried to put him out of hers—and failed. The uncertainty over this reply assumed the nature of a test—a test of her old ideals, as much as a test of Val. Could the love of a friend prove great enough to survive all that had happened? Or would it, after all, have burned away into smoke through the flames of the senses?

All her revived spiritual cravings seemed to wait for the answer to these questions—almost seemed to rest upon it. The possible danger in the fulfilment of these cravings, apart from Harry, never occurred to her now. Once, long ago, she had realized they must not gain readmittance. But now, that was silly, futile: as futile as trying to shut out the tide lest it spoil a child's sand-castle.

To pass the time of waiting, she threw herself into local festivities. But the constant irritant increased her restlessness. Sometimes she accompanied Freda to a concert or play in Cuvingham. But these proved well-nigh unbearable. Music and drama were inseparable from Val: on her own nature their effect was that of a wine on a teetotaler. And Freda was one of those exasperating people whose self-esteem passes for intellect. She thought it clever to be unfavorably critical. While Leo's enthusiastic emotions found something good in the poorest productions, Freda's intellect found something weak in the best. After a few heated attempts, therefore, this companionship was tacitly dropped. Leo went alone, if she went at all.

Bevvie, that knight of damsels, brought the *leitmotiv*

into this crescendo of unrest. He appeared every day in some form or other; and his serious vapidity bore a pale ironic reflection of the turbulence in her mind. One day he even hired a horse to accompany her for a ride. But he fell off twice. In Romance such undignified things don't happen. Whoever heard of Lancelot falling from his charger when Guinevere was present? Bevvie relinquished this form of gallantry. "Shanks' pony" on the links proved safer. People began to say that people would begin to talk. . . . Arnie warned Bevvie more than once. Bevvie "cut" Arnie for a fortnight.

On the links he aired his views more freely than he swung his clubs. He also aired other people's views. He read "deep" stuff, did Bevvie. . . .

"We are only shadows," he remarked once, after losing a hole.

"What of?" Leo demanded quickly.

Bevvie felt a little uncomfortable. This embarrassing directness he often considered to be Leo's one failing.

"Oh, I don't know. . . . It's not my view of course. Some Johnny said it. . . .Your shot, Mrs. Wallis."

"And what is your view about us?" she asked when, with safer gallantry than horsemanship, he handed her her clubs. "If we are not shadows, what are we?"

"Just products. I fear I am rather atheistic, Mrs. Wallis. I have studied the question very thoroughly and——"

"You are in the bunker. Cheers! That gives me a chance." Bevvie marveled again. It was considered etiquette to express sorrow over an opponent's bad luck, however hypocritical the sorrow might be. The uninitiated may not understand that, in golf, all trouble is "bad luck"; it is never bad play. Should a cow, sheep, worm, or crow be present, the blame is probably theirs. Or, perhaps, another player sneezed at the far side of the links. . . .

"Yes," Bevvie continued, after a hefty shot with his niblick, "I have weighed the matter thoroughly—been quite fair to all parties—but I still remain an atheist. I am convinced there is nothing beyond this." He waved a hand.

"Beyond the links?"

"No." Bevvie was too intense for humor. "Beyond this actual world. Of course you may not agree. There may be many opinions equally well-founded."

Leo was climbing a stile. She sat, for a moment, upon the top bar, and glanced round at the wintry landscape. Through a feathery, brown-gray network of trees, burned long forks of golden flame, from a mauve-red crater into which the sun was sinking. The rest of the sky was of that opalescent, grayish hue, tinged with rose and blue, that is peculiarly mystical. A bluish haze surrounded the woods, save where the sunset cast warm reflections. An echo of mysteries came to her with the call of a pheasant from a neighboring copse. For a moment she could almost fancy the few gray clouds were phantom figures, sweeping through the mists of blue and rose to the "Land of Youth," where Beauty ruled.

She sprang down with a little catch of her breath. "Oh! I think—I think—I don't agree." Val's sublime faith rushed warmly round her heart. "I know I don't agree," she amended.

"Have you any theories of your own, then?" Bevvie asked.

"No. I never theorize; I—just live. . . . My ball is in this beastly hedge."

"I have no settled theories of my own—*yet*," he asserted, hitting the hedge aimlessly with a club. The "yet" held a dark threat. "But only one thing is absolutely real in life."

"What is that?"

"Love," said Bevvie.

"U—um. . . .Oh! There's my ball—under your heel!"

Bevvie swore beneath his breath. She was frightened off again, this little country girl! No: she certainly did not "know the ropes." And she took a lot of teaching. . . .

Unfortunately, he had not sufficient time for such instruction before returning to Oxford. People said his departure was a good thing, because other people said that Wallis said he was "going to put his foot down."

Early in February a fresh local diversion was provided by the appearance of twins at the vicarage.

"If that isn't just like Susie!" laughed Leo. "She always overdoes things for her Sam."

"My dear!" Harry laughed. "It's fortunate that some people——" He broke off and lighted a cigarette rather hastily.

"Do their duty?" she amended blandly, but with an ominous light in her eyes.

"I didn't say so."

"Not in words—no."

His glance met hers coldly. "I was going to say 'Consider their husband's wishes.'"

"Oh? That's worse. And it's silly. In these matters no 'considering' is any good. If your—wishes—are not gratified, you must divorce me and marry a suitable—heifer."

"Leo!" He rose impatiently from the breakfast-table.

"If that is all you married me for?" she continued, unabashed. "I used to think men married for—for so much more—*more!*"

Harry gathered up his papers and letters. Breakfast is not a tactful moment to choose for calling one's husband "silly."

"If they can't have an honorable home and children with their wives, where else can they?" he asked testily.

Leo rose, pushing back her chair irritably. "Is that really all they want? Just 'honorable' children? Oh, Harry! Sometimes I think you have married the wrong woman."

He looked quickly back at her, his hand on the doorknob. "That is nonsense, Leo." Some unconsciously desolate note in her voice prompted him to return to the hearthrug, where she stood with drooped head, gazing into the fire. "You know that is nonsense. Some day"—he passed a hand over the short wavy hair—"some day—you will see these things from my point of view."

"And shall you—from mine?"

"I hope they will be the same."

The invisible strands that were forming a rope within to coil about her limbs, stirred and reminded her of their existence as she met a softened light in his eyes and felt his touch.

"Harry . . ." she muttered, half afraid, "I wonder—"

He kissed her unexpectedly. "I don't," he said. . . .

As she rode down to the vicarage her idealistic words to Val seemed to taunt her. The physical was so much the minor side of love, she had averred. Yet—how altogether wrong she had been. Could the two possibly be adjusted? Must it be always, with her, entirely one or—entirely the other?

The drab disillusionment idealists are bound to suffer before their adjustment of the real and the ideal is accomplished, united with the dull weather to depress Leo, to awaken a dormant vein of cynicism. The Reverend Sam, sleek, self-satisfied, proud as if he unaided had accomplished the production of twins, increased her irritation. "See what *I* have done!" his urbanity seemed to cry.

"A fine boy—splendid!" he beamed. . . . "Yes—quite a nice little girl, too."

"I am glad. Susie wanted a girl."

"Did she? She never told me. *I* was very keen on a boy. There has been a clergyman in our family for seven generations without a break. Besides, it's better for a son to be the first——"

"The—*first?*"

Mr. Murray smiled benignantly upon the boyish figure in the saddle. "Well—well! I believe in duty, you know. Old-fashioned, maybe—hard——"

"Duty is easy enough if somebody else does the suffering." She flicked the mare's back with her whip, causing the animal to paw the gravel. "And—Susie is all right?"

"Splendid! God has been good to us, Mrs. Wallis. Those were her first words, afterward."

"A little too good!" Leo muttered into the horse's mane.

She left the Reverend Sam to his duty, and trotted down the drive. At the gate she met Mrs. Kerry, who detained her with a long account of Arnie's birth and of her own sufferings. Mrs. Kerry liked plenty of detail. . . . When she could escape, Leo crossed the lane to a bit of common, and put her mare into a canter. Something of the old physical horrors descended with the drizzling rain; and the rope coiled closer around her. . . .

Some spirit of revolt passed from rider to horse. The canter merged into a gallop. With ears laid back, the mare dashed recklessly across the common, avoiding rabbit-holes by a hair's-breadth, splashing through puddles. Leo never sought to check her until the road was reached. Then she leaned down and patted the quivering neck.

"That's better, old girl! . . . Much better. . . ."

The second cross upon her calendar was reached at last. By any mail now, Val's reply might arrive, if it came at all, She scanned the envelopes of each post, throwing them down again with a blank sense of disappointment. When

the days wore on to a week, then to a fortnight, the darkness of disillusion became intensified. Would the test fail? Had that, after all, been the real Val up in the mountains? Was the old Val, for whom her spirit yearned, but a myth? If life were to be one long series of disillusions, why had she not been born with a different nature?—one that *fitted in* more easily?

February dragged on in the dank mugginess so depressing to a nature sensitive to beauty, causing Leo's spirits to drop lower. Harry was away a great deal, apart from business. He had been inveigled into a bridge club; and had been persuaded this winter to "take up" shooting. In flawless tweeds and leggings he trudged through woods and fields with Mr. Bonne and Mr. Kerry. Armies of beaters, keepers, dogs, accompanied them. Sometimes they brought home quite a dozen head of game. . . . Leo tried to treat the matter seriously.

"At this time of year only cock birds are killed," Mr. Kerry explained one day. "We mustn't kill the hens. It's rather difficult not to, sometimes."

"Oh, I don't think you will," she assured him gravely. "I shouldn't worry."

Naturally he misinterpreted this remark. He smiled at the compliment to his own powers of judgment. . . . Now that shooting proper was over, these sportsmen turned their attention to rabbits one day a week.

That dangerously fatal question "What's the use of anything?" was creeping into Leo's mind. It is a worm—a canker—a snake in the grass, for which no death can be too sudden or too violent. To an idealist it is the chief menace in a neighborhood composed of materialism. And the other side of life, not being allowed serious admittance, can not wholly claim its own.

The terrific activity of the people in Willerton over lit-

tle things began to seem inane. What mattered the loss of a golf-match, the date of their wine's vintage, imperfections in a cook? A horrible sense of littleness assailed her. The huge cosmic scheme revolved throughout the ages, like a wheel of Juggernaut's car, to which everything and everybody was tied. Each in turn would be crushed, thrown out —where? To the heathen god Vishnu? Or to the land of beauty? Or to a dust-heap? In any case, what would matter a badly cooked potato, a lost putt, the cost of Mrs. Bolten's new hat?

She made a remark to this effect one day, after listening to the chief widow's recital of Mrs. Kerry's disappointment with a dressmaker. A new "gown," promised for a local party, had not arrived in time.

"Oh—well—she had another, I suppose?" Leo stifled a yawn and picked up Mink.

"Yes; her copper satin. But, as she says, she has been seen in that so often. You remember? She wore it at the Kerrys' ball, and at——"

"I didn't notice. Did she? What does it matter? In a hundred years' time will it count? Don't you often feel what helpless midgets we are, playing like gnats in the sun for a few minutes, and then——" She snapped her fingers.

"U-um . . . er. U-m. U-m. . . . That *is* a sweet jumper you're wearing, Mrs. Wallis. Did you make it yourself?"

"No."

"Did you get it in Cuvingham?"

"No."

Mrs. Bolten waited in vain for details of the town, the shop, the price, the size, to be poured into her ears. Feeling uncomfortably snubbed, she changed the subject frigidly.

"How is Mr. Wallis keeping now? Better?"

"He hasn't been ill."

"Better than he used to be, I mean."

"Why?" She looked up quickly. "Used he to be ill?"

Mrs. Bolten stared. "Hasn't he told you? He used to be very delicate at one time. And he nearly died of pleurisy, just when war broke out. It left him weak for years. Factory life undermines one so, . . . That's why he wasn't passed for the war. He tried to go; though everybody told him it was very silly. For munitions were just as important as men. And if one needn't go. . . ."

For how long she continued airing these views, Leo never knew. She raised a hand to hide the hot flush of shame which covered her face at the recollection of past hastiness of speech and thought. But the flush of shame merged into one of relief and pride. Harry had not sat down in an office chair, and made his fortune, while older men offered their lives, without first offering his. And, she realized instinctively, his very reserve upon the subject proved how deeply it had been felt. That thong of grit in his character would not lightly give in. She ought to have known—to have had faith.

"Beast!" she apostrophized herself, as she had done once before. "I will make up to him—I will! I will! . . ."

But good resolutions often get crushed by circumstance. And this time her own spirit of devilment unwittingly proved the circumstance. Mrs. Bonne had more than once, in Leo's presence, signified her disapproval of women who rode astride. It was "fast." Therefore when, two days ago, Mrs. Bonne honored her, for the first time, with an invitation to play golf, Leo's devil incited her to ride to the links and play in her riding-breeches. . . .

The news fled round Willerton. The ladies gazed at one another painfully. The gentlemen sniggered.

"Perfectly horrible!" Arnie said, and at once wrote to tell Bevvie.

"I shall give Wallis a hint. He ought not to allow it," the Kerry bull decided.

Unfortunately, this hint occurred while Mrs. Bolton was having tea at The Towers. Harry's reception of it resembled his reception of Mr. Wood's previous one. And he returned home in much the same frame of mind. Another painful scene ensued. It was *not done,* said Harry. Furthermore, it never should be done, by anybody belonging to him. Had Leo no shred of dignity? Leo, goaded, naturally conceived a violent passion for playing golf in riding breeches.

"Much more sensible than skirts! Look at the Americans. You are getting absolutely stuffy, Harry. I—I shall play in nothing, if I wish."

Again the scene developed into the question of married rights. Again, in his anger, Harry slipped a little back into the crude material.

"You've got to recognize responsibility."

"So have you. A man is just as responsible for his wife—what she is, what she may become, even what she might be. This neighborhood—in the question of woman's position—is fifty years behind the times. And you wish to fall into line with it! To make me fall into line! . . . I can't . . . I can't . . . and I won't! You—you are allowing yourself to sink into materialism! It's like a great boiling pot which everybody falls into—and nobody can ever get out again." She walked about his study, clutching with restless hands a book she held. "I know—I can feel it. . . . Oh, Harry! Can't we get out while there's time?"

He was watching her with frowning bewilderment.

"My dear girl—what do you mean? Surely you are happy? You have all you can wish——"

"Yes, yes—in *that* way. But there is such—emptiness—behind! *I* should be content with a cottage away on—

Dartmoor—or a desert island. It would be a fuller life, if—if you and I——"

He caught her wrists, giving her a little shake. "This twaddle is fifty years behind the times, if you like!"

She freed herself, conscious of a contraction in her throat. How far the gap had yawned of late! What branch could be used now for getting across? Was it to be complete surrender of all the other side of herself—the side that was struggling up again toward the light? Such surrender was impossible. Val had said both were one. Could this ever be? To her mind the spiritual and the material were becoming more decisively separated. Her husband stood near, on one side; Val, far off, upon the other. The gulf lay between—a deeper gulf than ever Susie had realized, months ago, in London. Not the obvious one of class distinction. Difficult as that might prove, it was, in places, with mutual care, capable of being bridged. But the deep hidden gulf—what could bridge that?

She drew back the curtains and looked out of the window. A full moon—remote, cold, dispassionate, rode high in the blue-black sky, now and then half screened by fragments of gray cloud flitting, wraith-like, across it, then mingling again with the darkness. The smell of damp earth, wet laurels and firs, stole in; the stretches of lawn and clumps of shrub were dimly visible, ethereal, belonging to a world shrouded and still. Lashed into rebellion by the irritants around, the old mysticism deep within her nature, inseparable from it, struggled upward, in a little choking cry—

"What it might be! Oh—what it might be if we freed ourselves . . . let ourselves go . . . Harry! Have you never felt——"

"You will catch cold by that open window," he remarked. He crossed the room, drew the curtains again,

and passed his hand up her bare arm. "You *are* cold—shivering. What's the matter, Leo?" With puzzled anxiety, he kissed her, then scanned her face. It looked strangely pale, strangely remote, giving him the impression of a shell which, if he liked, he could kiss and fondle; but where was the life inside? For the first time the possibility of something more than empty idealism in her words—something vague and shadowy yet not to be laughed away—crossed his mind with a stab of uneasiness. She made no response to his question. Conscious of repulse, of the closed door, he stooped to pick up a fold of paper which had fallen from her book.

"What's this?"

"My book-mark."

He glanced carelessly at the slip. Then, with a sudden interest, he took it nearer the light on his writing-table.

"Poetry? Are you fond of poetry, Leo?" Some vague instinct of a key to her closed door prompted the question. She gave a little laugh at the question. She gave a little laugh at the form it took.

"'Fond of poetry'? I don't know. I never have thought. If it's real it—grips me. . . . 'Fond'?"

He read aloud, in his slow quiet voice, the words scribbled in a hand he did not know.

"Rise again, ye shades of Dreamland!
Open, portals of my heart!
Songs of love in magic numbers
Cause the tears of love to start.

"Through the pinewood will I wander
Where the mountain brooklet springs,
Where the forest stags are roaming,
Where the little song-thrush sings."

There fell a silence in the room when he ceased. Leo's heart seemed full of turbulent emotions as she looked at his bent head and Val's scrawled words in his hands.

"That's very pretty," he said, and read the first two lines again. "Very pretty. Who wrote it?"

She opened the door. "It is quite—'pretty.' A translation of Heine. Not a man likely to be known about here! Wouldn't go down at all. Worse than my riding breeks! Good night, Harry."

The door closed—two doors, Harry thought. He sat down at his table, the verses still in his hands. For some time he remained staring at them unseeingly, his brows drawn together. Then he read them through again and put the paper in his pocketbook.

Taking up a Bradshaw, he looked out trains for a business engagement up north the next day.

CHAPTER II

HARRY departed next morning before Leo was up. A murky fog enhanced the depression of a lonely breakfast, and seemed to press down on her head. Afterward she rode to the vicarage to sit with Susie. The twins appeared to have made a compact to yell together whenever a visitor opened her lips. Leo tried to agree with Susie that the sound was musical. She tried to see beauty in the two red-faced bundles. They but symbolized to her the word duty and the horrible mysteries of physical suffering. In her present state of mind, this seemed to clip the wings of her spirit; to coil the material rope more closely about her limbs. . . .

In the afternoon, seething with her sense of duty, she paid three calls and toyed with three teas. She found Mrs. Hawkes in a state of matrimonial indigestion. Mr. Hawkes, it appeared, had allowed his two retrievers to follow him into the house. One had dashed up-stairs and placed his muddy forepaws upon the bed where Mrs. Hawkes was having her nap. It fairly scared 'er to death. And the sheets had been clean only that morning. Now the top one would have to go to the laundry, without being used even for one night. What with the shock, and the present-day washing expenses, and her husband's lack of consideration, Mrs. Hawkes had 'ad a headache ever since.

"Gentlemen alone make enough dirt in the house, without dogs too. I'd keep the lot out, if I could 'ave my way. This isn't the first time. . . ." A detailed synopsis of the habits of Mr. Hawkes followed, during which Leo got hotter

and redder. Lack of reticence over married life was, to her, the most abhorrent of all forms of unreserve. She switched the conversation to golf at the first pause. But this only led to an outburst of indignation over Violet's being beaten in a match yesterday.

With a sigh of relief Leo returned home from her duty. She entered the big bright hall, leaving the foggy weather and foggier minds outside. A wood fire crackled cheerfully, from before which a pack of dogs bounded up with vociferous welcome. After responding, and soothing them, she turned to the table whereon lay the evening's post.

And there, with a warmth of welcome that caused her heart to leap, Val's familiar scrawl caught her eye.

She seized the envelope with both hands. The very postmark, the thin foreign paper, the careless dots and dashes, brought a rush of air from wide space—breathed the word Freedom. The fog that had enwrapped her spirit, as well as the outside world, of late, rolled away, forgotten. Once Harry had brought the lantern whose gradually strengthening beams had dispersed the mists. Now, Val's letter formed, as it were, the light of electricity that scattered them with one radiant flash. She hurried to her own sitting-room, followed by the dogs. Shut away from all but those comprehending eyes, she tore open the envelope.

And, as she read, the wild tumult within abated. Contact with the wide free spaces brought the balm of rest. She felt home again—home, in the truest sense, midst the blessed harmony of understanding.

For Val wrote:

"Of course I understand, and now, at last, you understand too. The blessedness of that! Thank God for those words of yours! I have been through hell, Leo—a hell you could never enter. What I am I owe to you. You saved me from being—what I dare not remember. And your past

words have saved me ever since. . . . So how can *you* talk of forgiving? Hoots! Perhaps, some day, I can repay my debt. . . . Of course our friendship was true. And of course it is the same. Bless you for missing it! Now sit down at once, take up a pen, and tell me every damned thing about yourself. . . . Bless you again, old pal.—VAL.

Tears in her eyes and laughter curling her lips, Leo sat in the firelight. She could hear Val *saying* this letter, with its characteristic twists, its attempts at stiltedness. Harry would not return until to-morrow. But now she felt glad. For she no longer stood alone on the far side of the gulf. The hand she had missed for so long held her own once more, with the old mysterious inspiration in its grasp—the elusive inspiration that she had graphically called "her transmitter." There was no need, to-night, to hurl herself back to the side of the gulf on which she was expected to dwell.

The first instinct upon returning home is to rest, and to gaze contentedly around; the next, to inspect each familiar haunt—hurrying through some, sauntering through others. Leo's period of rest was ended by the dressing-gong and the stern eye of Ross. After dinner she returned to her sitting-room and opened the piano. All the music associated with Val, all the books they had shared, the beauties of other minds, the struggling ideas of their own, could now be allowed full admittance. The door to this home could be flung wide open. Within, all was dusted, cleaned, sweet once more: the silver was real, so was the gold; there was no dross. . . . And Leo flung wide the door and entered, leaving the world outside, forgotten.

It was late when she went to bed. She drew aside the curtains and looked out at the shadowy garden, as she had done the night before in Harry's study. The fog had lifted. Across the moon the clouds formed a remote endless procession, resembling the silent march of a vigilant host guard-

night. She posted the letter, and turned toward the vicarage, feeling a warmer interest in the babies and the local world around, which Susie quickly noticed. The practical questions raised by the twins' appearance occurred to Leo, with somewhat astounding results. "You mean to say you don't yet possess a—a pram?"

"Well"—Susie turned pink—"they are so expensive. We waited—to make sure, you know. . . . Now we are looking out for a cheap double one—a second-hand one."

Leo had opened her cigarette-case. At a cough from Sam she closed it again. "Won't you want two?"

"*Two?* My dear! One double pram must do."

The Reverend Sam smiled indulgently at such ignorance. "How could one pair of hands push two prams?" he asked.

Leo started in the way that usually caused him to feel uncomfortable—therefore annoyed.

"'One pair of hands'?" she repeated. "But—you will have two nurses?"

The vicar laughed. "How little you understand of a poor parson's life, Mrs. Wallis! We have been lucky enough to find a young girl in the village to come in for a few hours daily, to help Ellen with the extra work and give Susie a hand."

"And Susie is expected to do all the rest? You—you would actually allow that?"

"How can he help it, dear?" murmured Susan.

Sam had not thought about the matter. These things formed women's duty. . . . Women were made to do them. . .

"My little Su!" With one of her rare quaint touches of motherliness, Leo perched herself on the back of the couch and seized her friend's hand.

For a moment Susie leaned against the firm young shoulder, enjoying the wholesome aroma of good soap, good to-

bacco and good covert-coating. Blushing scarlet, Leo hurled forth her astounding and sudden resolve.

"Look here—can I be Godmother to them both? You once suggested it for—one, before this—er—deluge."

Susan sat up with a gasp. Sam rubbed his plump hands, laughing indulgently again.

"Can you really undertake to teach two Catechisms? Wouldn't the training of two souls in the Church's laws be—rather a responsibility?" he asked, with a hint of sarcasm.

Leo waved him away. "Godparents are allowed a voice in their godchildren's welfare," she announced. "So consider the pram question settled, Su. Christening present you know. . . . And about a nurse—Kitty Marten wants a place in the country, and I—oh, yes, *yes!* I insist. I won't listen to refusals." . . . She sprang down and made for the door, her fingers in her ears. "Why should I wallow in luxury while my poor little Su pushes a monster pram?"

Before they could recover their wits, she had dashed out of the room and down the stairs, overcome with the embarrassment of philanthropy among friends. She leaped into the saddle and cantered down the drive, nearly colliding with Miss Caroline Dunne in the narrow lane outside. Miss Dunne hurled her massive form off her bicycle. She was in a terrific state of bustle—had been for quite a month, in fact. For in about another month's time she and Rosalind were starting for their annual trip abroad. This always entailed tremendous preparation. Caroline liked then completely to overhaul her wardrobe. She also visited the dentist, "just in case anything wanted doing"; had her hair cut, singed, shampooed, and—in strict secrecy—waved. The sudden phenomenon of rippling gray-brown tresses instead of the usual straggling ends was supposed to appear quite natural. She also visited the manicurist and—owning a chronic corn—the chiropodist. Hat-boxes innumerable

weighed down the postman. Volcanic eruptions took place daily. At last, with about nine articles of baggage to Rosalind's two, Caroline set forth, a large packet of "Mothersill" in her hand-bag. . . .

"We are going with Rosy's cousin this year—the one who was in Switzerland last summer. She is coming here first. You must meet her, Mrs. Wallis, and talk over that singer. You know." . . .

Leo muttered some inarticulate words. "The devil!" she whistled, riding on. "If Sarah met me it would give Willerton jaundice. I wouldn't mind that—but Harry——"

The impatience of an engineer to see his bridges completed possessed her to-day. Acutely conscious of the dreariness of their last evening together, she longed, while yet bathing in last night's exaltation, for Harry's return. For she had resolved to extend a definite welcome within the portals of her recaptured home. To leave him outside, while she and Val were in, never occurred to her mind.

Wiggins had received orders to meet the Northern Express at Cuvingham Station at eight thirty. Though the night was pouring wet, Leo resolved to go too. She wrapped herself up in the moleskin coat that had been Harry's Christmas present, and entered the big closed car with a throb of anticipation. Harry should come back to her. She would not allow him to drift away into the muddy pond of localism. Nor should he become one of those strange men who thrust their women-folk into some corner where they could cook, sew, bear their children; but share their life—form the complete whole of which each was an equal part—never! She would fight those lurking, hostile forces that emanated from the spirit of the neighborhood.

"If only I could get him away, for a time, where the atmosphere is different!" she thought, as the car entered the station yard.

The train arrived almost simultaneously, bringing a slight disappointment. When Harry arrived he was accompained by his partner, Mr. Milne. They were deep in some discussion, and Leo felt the instinctive consciousness of her presence being considered more of an interruption than a pleasure. This was usually the case with Mr. Milne. He looked upon women as subordinate and somewhat untrustworthy necessities. Perhaps he had just cause; for such a good husband had he been that his wife, a few years ago, had eloped. People said she must have been an extremely wicked woman, for Mr. Milne was such an expert business man, so zealous over work and finance and duty that he never went away for pleasure, or frequented clubs, or "noticed" women, or spent his time at music-halls. . . . To his dying day, this excellent husband would never understand the wicked woman's tastes in preferring a man who painted pictures and wrote poetry. . . . But his manner to the women he never "noticed" was very polite. He was, to use Mrs. Hawkes' words, "a very polished gentleman." So brightly shone the polish, in fact, that to Leo's clear eyes the veneer was too evident.

"Allow *me!*" he exclaimed, when she put out a hand to pull up the rug. "Oh—please allow me!" She "allowed" him, with a faint renewal of the old irritation.

"Was it cold in Lancashire?" she inquired politely, after a pause that threatened to become awkward. Mr. Milne was not in the mood for "making talk to ladies" as he called it; and Harry seemed desperately tired.

"Very cold—very cold indeed! Oh, *do* allow me, Mrs. Wallis." Leo had let the rug slip again. "And we have had a most tiring day. . . . These beastly Labor problems—I *beg* your pardon. I—er—I forgot, for the moment . . . a lady present. I *beg*——"

"These *damned* problems? Why apologize?"

When Mr. Milne had bowed himself out upon his own door-step, she drew a breath of relief, and thrust her hand through her husband's arm. "He is so *un*real—makes me feel as if I'm walking on ice," she muttered.

"An excellent head for finance," Harry observed. He pressed the gloved fingers that had crept into his own. "Whatever made you come out, on such a rotten night?"

The detachment in his tone hurt Leo, seeming to repulse her. Why could he not understand, respond—make an advance across the bridge himself?

"Just—to meet you—something to do," she replied carelessly. Then, consciously ignoring the repulse, "Are you tired, Harry?"

"Very." He took off his hat and pushed back his hair. "And my head's crammed with figures. I'm working out a scheme for next week's conference—oh, well—we don't want to talk about that now. Is everything all right at home?"

"Quite." Tactfully she refrained from seizing upon this plank for helping the bridge. He was a tired man come home for rest. . . .

"Tell me about the conference some time, Harry."

"Tell you? Oh. . . . It's not at all interesting to outsiders."

"But I am not an outsider! I am a partner! You seem to forget that."

A memory of the door she had shut between them lately crossed his tired brain. But it was too full of financial matters at the moment to comprehend the significance of this key being offered. The memory was quickly followed by others, including that of his last night at home.

"I thought *you*—forgot that?" he replied.

Again she felt repulsed. And again, while bowling up the drive, she resolutely ignored the repulse and made another effort. "Perhaps we both forget. . . . Don't the lights

of the house look jolly? So welcoming." She pressed his arm to her side. "I'm so glad to have you back, Harry. Are—are you glad to come?"

He laughed gently. "Of course! But I have not been away forty-eight hours. The lights do look cheerful. Warmer than—what did you want?—a hut on a desert island?"

"Warmer? I am—not—so—sure," she murmured slowly, as the car stopped before the door.

"Aren't you? I am."

This foundation was not the most encouraging for the commencement of a bridge. He turned at once toward his study, but she called him back.

"Don't you want something to eat?"

"No. We dined on the train."

"Well . . . won't you come and talk in my room for a bit?"

"I must attend to all these letters that came yesterday and to-day. I'm sorry, Leo. But to-morrow I have to run up to London." . . .

Leo turned away, conscious of a mist before her eyes. It had all been so very disappointing.

She went to her sitting-room and reread Val's letter.

With the passing of the days, the difficulty—it seemed an impossibility—of bridging the gulf, struck her more forcibly. The exaltation produced by Val's letter wore gradually away, thwarted thus at every turn.

Harry was submerged by an unprecedented boom of trade at his works. Moreover, with the increasing fame of his name in industrial circles, his opinion became daily more sought. This naturally took him away more and more frequently. His free time being full up with local interests, home became a place in which to eat, drink and rest. Leo

made no demands, uttered no reproaches. She was always ready, when he could be with her. But those were usually the times when he was tired. Now and then he realized more poignantly the closed door upon her retreat into a world in which, in apparent content, she dwelt alone. At such times, he made blundering efforts to reach her. He would go to her sitting-room and ask her to play—then, lulled by the music, fall asleep. Or he would join her in the library, and become immersed in some technical volume he had often meant to read. . . .

And with undue strain, the hinges of the door Leo had meant to leave open ceased to revolve. As far as she knew, it remained ajar; but it was no longer flung wide. In loneliness of spirit, the cosmic sense of Oneness faded again into doubts. Was it all real? Or did Harry's world constitute the only real world? When the material alone is recognized, its gigantic proportions throw their shadows over everything beyond, until a colossal faith alone can answer these questions unmoved, without a waver of doubt.

She began to long again for stimulation from Val; to count the days until an answer could come to her letter. And, imperceptibly at first, her doubts took another, more tangible turning. The Husband—the mate of her body, whose presence and caresses yet held magic, who alone had mastered her senses and her will; and the Friend—the mate of her spirit, for whom her flesh never craved, to whom everything not material in her nature clung for inspiration: which of these two loves formed the Real?

CHAPTER III

MISS CAROLINE DUNNE had been in eruption for a fortnight. Lava flowed all around Willerton.

"People are *too* provoking! Nobody considers anybody nowadays. Lack of consideration is the canker at the root of society. That's why it's so rotten." . . .

"What's up?" Leo asked, when a pause occurred. She had been a trifle wary, lately, over intercourse with The Cottage. A year ago she would have danced into the danger zone, snapping careless fingers. But the thought of Harry, as well as of Val, now restrained her. With her newly-gained knowledge of middle-class outlook, she realized the impossibility of silencing malicious tongues with the truth. Filthy scandal thrown at Val's absent head was not to be borne. The gulf between Harry and herself must not be widened. . . .

"Whenever I reason sensibly, the devil steps in," she reflected. "I'll leave it all to chance. . . ."

"A telegram from Katie Blake," Miss Dunne snorted brimstone. "She's had 'flu and wants to postpone our trip. And now I don't suppose she will come down here, after all."

"Oh!" Leo could think of no other remark. Chance was certainly deciding the matter.

"I wanted you to meet each other. You have so much in common. She ought to have been more careful. To get 'flu just when our plans——"

"Er—have another cup of tea, Miss Dunne? Never mind. We may get another chance some time." . . .

When her visitor had departed she drew a breath of relief, laughed, then sat down to an unfinished letter to Val.

These letters were becoming the only outlet for her nature. When shut up with pen and paper, pouring out her mind, she really lived. When immersed in the every-day events around, a peculiar inertia pressed upon her spirits—a kind of lassitude. By every mail now she received a characteristically moody scrawl. Sometimes this took the form of a rhapsody over something he had seen, heard, read, or felt—the essence of which he often expressed in scribbled bars of music. These gave the *motif* of his consciousness; for, as usual, Val wasted no time upon technical details: he ignored, sublimely, all exterior description. Sometimes he wrote from the depth of gloom—the world was a failure. It had been lent to Humanity to shape and perfect, and Humanity had failed. We had defeated our original purpose; had turned the by-products into the main-products. We had shackled ourselves when freedom might have been our lot. . . . Sometimes the letters would be full of humorous inconsequence, or soaring ideals.

In due course the answer to her own first outpouring arrived. In this he was unusually discreet, almost pedantic. She knew nothing of the illumination brought to his imaginative mind by her words. She could not know of the hours of uncertainty, the wrestle between the two guardians of his soul, the amount of paper covered and burned, before he sought to heal, strangling the temptation that lay in his path.

"I bow before your husband. To have 'cracked the nut' and swallowed the kernel, without indigestion. . . . Well! Well! But the achievement beyond motor-cars is his! He has taught *you* the word 'Responsibility.' I who write these lines do know, O rebellious one, that peace can only be found in that word—dash! there's a blot. In the hey-day of youth

I thought differently. Now, with the gray hairs of age, I perceive certain beauties hidden under its stodginess. You weighed me down with its shackles at one time—I have never recovered. Now it's my turn! The whole meaning of life is *'giving out,'* Leo. Haven't you discovered that? Else why are we here? Artists are but servants of their Art, responsible for every discordant note or thought they allow to disfigure the world. And it's the same with your 'Business Men,' in more practical matters. And socially? We are probably responsible for the actions of strangers who pass us in the street. A smile might turn away a man's thoughts from suicide. I have no fear of your falling into your 'Noah's Ark.' For the life of me I can't see why fleas were saved from the flood. But probably there was a reason. And so with 'Arnies.' (I'd love to see his 'Marcel Wave'!) Here endeth the first and last sermon of Richard Valyran, Tenor. No it doesn't—damn this pen!—Leo, the two Reals *are* one. If a man's conscious life obscures the full realization of this, the knowledge is there, in his subconscious mind. A consuming work—whether art or mechanics or science—is, in a way, a curse, because it causes forgetfulness of all else. It is one of 'Dalua's' shadows. Perhaps you don't know 'Dalua'? Don't try to *build bridges.* Leap across 'gulfs' as you leaped across ravines in Switzerland! You used to be agile. What's the matter? . . . ."

Leo laughed a little over this letter, the laughter akin to tears. Perhaps his hint was correct. She might be taking herself and her problems too seriously nowadays? A postscript, dashed across the corner of the last page, caused her to wonder:

"The world must keep idealism or it will stagnate. But every day I realize more that we must continually readjust our ideals, not expect the world to readjust itself to them. They will then be finer, and more truly alive. Facts are incontrovertible and the rest is merely point of view. And I think we make our own 'gulfs.'

"By the way, I'm coming to London next month. . . . Mail just off." . . .

Val, who had once been so intolerant of materialism, could now write like this. What knowledge had he gained during the past months of estrangement?—during the hours spent in what he called "hell"? Through every word she felt in him a subtle difference. He seemed to be in surer touch with actualities, and more tolerant. He was adjusting, where she had failed to adjust. From below the fires that had scorched, a surer growth had been put forth, as heather shoots up again in stronger luxuriance after being burned. His view of life's wholeness proved wider, more stable, than her own.

"But we don't *consciously* make our own gulfs," she reflected. "At least . . . not always. They just come, like earthquakes. . . ." And to leap across needed more agility than a narrow Swiss ravine with Val close at her side. . . . A sudden glow crept round her heart, with the warm radiance of the *Alpenglühen* over desolate mountain peaks. Val would be here again—close at her side. . . . He was coming back. . . .

Something of the old ecstatic joy shone in her eyes. Like a flower of the sun, clinging to the rocks that support its roots, yet lifts its head, opens every petal, blazes into joyful life at the appearance of its sun, Leo's soul blazed into riotous welcome at the mere thought of this reunion. . . .

Harry was away at the works. In the evening he would be at his bridge club; Saturday, out hunting. From his point of view, his life was full to the brim. Hers should be full too—but from her point of view. If marriage meant but a hole-and-corner companionship—not the union of body and spirit that she had dreamed—it was one of those "incontrovertible facts" to which she must bow. Physically,

love remained theirs. The gulf need not become visible. If a wife could not receive more from her husband, she need not give more. The rest could be given elsewhere—sure of being received, valued, reciprocated. . . . It would be no longer hidden away and starved.

Thinking thus, she walked far with her dogs that afternoon, with uplifted heart and her old buoyant step. Dusk was falling, when, humming a light tune, she turned the corner of the village street. And then the humming ceased abruptly. In momentary confusion, the blood rushed into her cheeks and she caught her breath—face to face with "Sarah"—Miss Blake's cousin-in-law.

Rosalind gave a little chirrup of pleased surprise. "This *is* lucky, Mrs. Wallis! We called at The Towers, but you were out. Katie came last night, and we are all off to-morrow. Everything has happened so suddenly. . . . Now, do let me introduce you."

"We have met before," began Mrs. Blake, her eyes never leaving Leo's flushed face. Something glittering behind their hardness turned the girl's confusion into cold anger.

"Indeed? I was not aware——"

"Not actually introduced, maybe. In Switzerland, last June——"

"Oh, you were in Switzerland then, Mrs. Wallis," Rosalind broke in, blissfully unaware of the tense atmosphere. "Did you really see each other? What a funny coincidence, after all our talk about Katie and—oh, and you knew him too."

"Are you really starting to-morrow?" Leo's brain felt in too much of a whirl to decide offhand what course to take.

"Yes; by the early train. Poor Carrie is in a terrible state. Neither of her new hats has arrived. And the Cuvingham hairdresser couldn't make an appointment, so she

has gone to London to-day to get her waving done. We are taking her luggage up with us to-morrow. And we are just wiring about the hats. . . . Now—could you call presently and talk to Katie, while I pack?"

"I am sorry," lied Leo decisively. "I'm engaged—all evening. Good-by, Miss Blake. I hope you will have a good time. . . ." With self-conscious haste she called in a straying dog and disappeared up the lane.

Mrs. Blake turned dramatically to her cousin. "That's the girl!"

"What girl?" Rosalind peered up vaguely through her pince-nez.

"*The* girl. The red-haired girl at the hotel with Richard Valyran."

"*NO!*"

"Fact."

Rosalind stood still, in the middle of the road. She removed her eye-glasses, clutching them for safety with both hands.

"I should have known her anywhere," continued the voice whose hardness vibrated now with excitement. "It's an unusual type. And she actually let you talk?—never gave the show away! Well! You *have* been *had*—all of you! And what about her husband?"

"I—I'm sure he knows nothing. Henry Wallis would never have married a——"

"Stop!" A new gleam came into "Sarah's" eye. She held up a forefinger, and stepped a little closer. "Didn't you tell me they married *very* suddenly? That it came as a shock to everybody? . . . And that was——"

"Early in August. But——"

"Ah! *Now,* we are getting at it." . . . She stepped yet closer.

It was quite an hour before the telegram was sent for

Carrie's hat. By that time Mrs. Kerry, Freda Dawes and Mrs. Bolten had joined the group, forming a compact squad, with heads almost interlocked.

Mrs. Bolten's tongue rolled lovingly along her lips. "I always said poor Henry Wallis had been taken in. Those stand-offish people are generally no better than they should be."

"I think it's simply *disgusting!*" cried Freda. "What *will* the Merleys say?—after calling too! And the Bottreux-Barlingtons—won't they be *mad?*"

"*I* think Henry Wallis ought to know." Mrs. Bolten's hopes threw out new shoots. She met Mrs. Kerry's eye, and held it meaningly with her own. "He shall know all right," said the glance between them.

"Arnie never liked her; nor did Tom." Mrs. Kerry felt proud of her men-folk's omniscience. She omitted Bevvie.

Rosalind felt rather afraid of this hornet's nest which she unwittingly had let loose upon Willerton. "Are you *quite* sure you are not mistaken, Katie? I thought her such a nice girl, though she will never make a good knitter. It will be such a scandal——"

"I'm positive," declared Mrs. Blake, in a tone that forbade doubt.

"And you saw"—Mrs. Bolten always liked plenty of detail—"you actually saw them in the same bedroom? At midnight?"

"He was just going in. It was like this." . . . The squad closed up yet more tightly.

Only the heavy shower of rain that would have put out a house's conflagration at last separated the happy gathering. But this kind of conflagration is not put out by rain. Rain merely nourishes its blaze indoors, over teacups.

Leo hurried home, not realizing the full extent of her danger—the ever-widening circle that this stone might pro-

duce in her life's pool. She only felt a seething indignation over the unmistakable construction which shone in Mrs. Blake's small eyes. After tea had calmed her somewhat, she was assailed by uncertainty. Would it mend or mar matters if she went down and talked frankly to that woman? Could such a one respond to the truth? In common justice, Leo was forced to admit grounds for suspicion. Those scenes Mrs. Blake had witnessed were, if regarded wrongly, compromising. But anger outweighed common justice. This suspicious-minded greed for scandal, this avidity for beastly constructions, shriveled up her kindlier instincts. Humanity, she thought sweepingly, was cruel at the core; heathenish and unmerciful—in spite of professed Christianity. People not only ignored ideals, they destroyed them. They brought out the worst in each other's nature. Val was right. We all were, to a great extent, responsible for those who formed our surroundings. How many people had been driven to desperate deeds by others' lack of understanding?

The whir of Harry's car scattered her reflections, also any faint idea of hurrying back to Mrs. Blake. He brought with him the polished Milne for an early dinner before going to the bridge club. Deciding that the less mud stirred the better, until Caroline and Rosalind returned, Leo dismissed the matter for the time being.

Dinner was rather a hurried affair. Mr. Milne made polite "lady's conversation" about the weather and local matters, without once dropping into slang. At least he only said "beastly" on one occasion, and apologized quickly, before any real harm had been done. He begged to be allowed to do all kinds of things—open doors, place chairs, pass helpings, and of course got in Pomfrey's way and upset the natural process of the meal. Mr. Milne's polish was always too evident. He was the kind of man who kept a woman waiting to shake hands while he took off his gloves.

Leo silently contrasted him with Harry. Though Milne had sprung from middle-class parents and had received the usual grammar-school education, while Harry had sprung from the class known as "laboring," with no education save the board school and his own efforts, no stranger would have hesitated in a choice of the better-bred man. Why was this? It proved the existence of another, subtler gulf: the gulf separating innate culture from innate second-rateness. She looked from Milne's affectation of manner and ease to Harry's perfect self-possession at the head of the table. Whatever little surface lapses of speech when unduly roused, whatever uncertainties about small matters of clothes, the vital spark of good-breeding lay at bottom to ignite his entire personality. Her pride in him quickened. He had forded every torrent in his career—and there must have been many—with sure feet. These he now failed to perceive must be spanned by her woman's intuition—leaped across.

When he came to her sitting-room to bid her good night she threw her arms round his neck with her old impulsiveness, her lips lingering on his. He wondered a little at this demonstrativeness, and drew her close.

"Everything all right, Leo?"

"Quite. Shall you be very late?"

"Probably. Why don't you have somebody in on these evenings?"

"I don't want anybody. I'm going to have a cozy time with music—write letters. . . . Harry."

"Yes?"

She fingered the lapel of his coat. "Couldn't we go away together for a little?"

"Away?" His voice was full of astonishment. "My dear girl, *I* can't get away at present—not before the summer. Why? D'you want a change? If you'd care to go to any of your friends——"

meanor since the morning, which, with quick intuition, she noticed. An added grimness about his lips, a hardness in his eyes, something stiff in his general attitude, crushed conversation and made her uneasy and stiff in return.

"If you want to talk to me, Harry, I'll go to your study," she called, when he went to change.

"Very well," he replied carelessly.

Some sense of foreboding caused this decision. With the wondrous knack of assimilation which rooms possess, her own sitting-room and the library had become too much a part of that private home—the secret chambers wherein her spirit found sanctuary with rarer spirits, and where Val seemed ever present—for any discordant note.

When Harry came down he found her gazing rather pensively into his study fire. With characteristic decision he strode across the room and thrust his hand through her arm.

"Leo, I want you to forgive me for speaking about this matter. But—for both our sakes—I must. Besides, you might hear from outside."

"Yes? Go on, Harry." A dawning gleam of the truth caused her to look quickly up at him, with compressed lips. He gazed into the fire and spoke jerkily, hurriedly.

"Some old busybody—relation of Miss Blake—has started a—a lying scandal about here. Of course, I don't believe this, Leo—I think I see how it has arisen. . . . It—it concerns you."

She remained absolutely still and silent, so he went on: "I heard a hint last night, from old Kerry—he thought I ought to know—and you too, of course. Very kind of him——"

"Oh . . . *very!* Go on, Harry." The sharpness in her tone caused him to look at her quickly. "I was very much amazed and I told him it was a lie. Then to-day, out hunting, I accidentally overheard some people talking . . . laugh-

ing. . . . By jove!" He withdrew his arm and strode angrily to the window, looked out for a moment, then came back. "For the first time in my life I positively itched to horse-whip somebody!" Again he took her arm. "D'you remember—weeks ago—showing me the picture of some actor—singer—you once knew . . . and telling me——"

"I remember perfectly. And I met Miss Blake's cousin yesterday." She was determined to make him go on to the end. All at once she felt chaotically uncertain of herself: of how to act—what line to take.

"Yes? Well—the facts of your knowing this—fellow, and of her seeing him with—with a girl in Switzerland, have in some way got mixed up. People are saying that——" He stopped, as if hating to repeat the words.

"That I am the girl?" Leo prompted, in a voice of deadly calm.

"My dear—yes. It's a horrible thing to have happened. I felt you ought to hear it from me first. Together we can put it right. . . . Don't look so worried."

"I'm—I'm wondering." Drawing herself free, she placed her hands on the high mantel, leaning her forehead against them. The terrific difference in Harry's point of view and hers came home to her with stabbing poignancy. Could she ever make him understand? Possessed by a sudden nauseating fear, she clutched the shelf and closed her eyes. The past lives of a husband and wife—so long as they did not affect each other—were, she had affirmed, and still would affirm, a private matter to each. But now, this one past act of hers did affect her husband. It must be denied or explained—and a lie was impossible. A lie would be an insult to him, to herself, to Val. Besides, she could not look into Harry's straight eyes and tell him a lie; her very soul revolted at the thought.

"Wondering—what?" She felt his hand on her shoulder.

She turned and grasped his coat with agitated fingers. "Harry, dear. . . . D'you remember, on our wedding day, I said that—our past lives were our private property?—Oh, don't look like that!"

At her first unexpected words he had knitted his brows in bewilderment. But something in her face, the hesitation in her voice, caused a violent and stunning realization of her meaning. He dropped his hand and stared, as if at some unexpected apparition.

"Leo! Are you—do you imply this—thing—is true?"

She nodded.

"But not in the sense Mrs. Blake means," she said quickly.

"My God!" The words were scarcely audible. Again he turned away to the window. Darkness was creeping across the garden and, mechanically, he drew the curtains. Only the leaping flames of the log fire lit up the room, embracing Leo's slim figure, striking vivid lights round the back of her head. From the shadows beyond, her husband gazed down at her in silence. When at last he spoke his voice sounded toneless.

"I must know—everything. I insist."

"I will tell you the truth." But she took so long to begin that he moved impatiently.

"Go on, Leo. The—truth, please."

"Val—Richard Valyran—and I—met during the war. I—I told you. . . . We were friends—great friends. . . . Afterward, he went on tour to Australia, then to America. We did not meet for two years. But—but our friendship remained the same. He came to Europe for a month, before going to South Africa. We arranged to meet then, in Switzerland. You understand, Harry? We—we—met as—*friends*. . . . Mrs. Blake came to the same hotel. . . . That's all."

Harry stared at her again, in the silence of bewilderment.

"But," he began, and paused again. "Isn't he—I heard he was married."

"He is. But they have a separation. That—made no difference."

"Made no—good lord, Leo! It's all preposterous!"

"Why? Why? Men and women often spend holidays together nowadays—— Oh, no, not those about here! I quite realize it would not be understood *here.*"

A memory had flashed across Harry's reeling mind, a memory that caused him to clutch the heavy curtain at his back. But he made no other movement.

"You—ask—me—to—believe—all this?" he said slowly.

She tossed back her hair. "No! I *expect* you to believe. Because it is the truth."

He suddenly stepped forward, and his eyes—those cruel pieces of steel they sometimes to her fancy became—seemed to cut her like a knife. "Then—what happened to your—'friendship'? What caused your agitation directly afterward, in London? . . . Ah! You had forgotten *that!* You thought I was right when I denied the existence of such—'friendship.' You were filled with fear . . . horror. . . . You owned you had been deceived. . . . It is *not* 'all,' Leo! Your face denies it." He gripped her shoulders. "What are you trying to hide?"

"Harry! Harry! There is nothing more. Nothing at least that——" Her eyes wavered beneath his, and she covered her quivering face. "Don't—don't—you believe? Only believe——"

The break in her voice was lost on Harry. He pulled down her hands roughly, so that her features were defenseless under his scrutiny.

"I must—*know,* Leo—if I am to believe."

"You said—once"—she mastered her quavering voice by

an effort—"that to—to look into—my eyes, told you all you wished to know of my—past. Wasn't that true? Isn't it true, now?—Harry, you are hurting my wrists——"

"What are you hiding? Why are you shielding this —fellow?"

She shrank back. "Sh-shielding——"

"He betrayed your trust. Ah! you can not deny that." . . .

Leo, at the mercy of his grip, glanced round the room wildly. A passionate desire to save Val from calumny overbore discretion for herself.

"It was my fault—my fault. I see that now. I expected too much of——"

"'Friendship'?" He gave a little sarcastic exclamation.

"Harry—indeed, indeed—you need know nothing more. I have told you all—quite honestly."

He threw aside her hands, with a harsh laugh. "We have very different ideas upon—honor."

Each wrist was red and aching. She dropped into a chair. "I seem to be too honest for this world, and not honest enough for the next," she observed drearily. "I will go away."

"*'Go away'!*" He swung round.

"I can't remain with a husband who won't believe in me."

"I haven't said I won't believe in you. Certainly I fail to understand you. But it is that—that blackguard who bewitched you——"

"How dare you? Oh"—she sprang to her feet and faced him, livid with anger, hands clenched and shaking—"how dare you? I—I won't hear a word against him. He is one of the finest—— But you could never understand! Nobody about here could understand. If you insinuate one word against him I shall go—I shall—oh, Harry! Harry!"

Overcome by her own passion and the strain of this scene

she sank into the chair again, buried her face in her arms, and burst into tears.

To Harry the warm fire turned suddenly cold. He remained motionless on the hearth-rug. The hollow desolate sensation of the bottom having dropped out of one's world came over him. It sounded in his voice when he spoke.

"You mean"—he put his fingers to his throat; the words seemed to stick—"you—love this man?"

It was a natural deduction. But the question cut Leo with a lash of a whip. She started up. For the first time she was actually faced with this problem, bound to confess or deny in crude words what only her heart understood. Her hesitation, the fear in her tear-filled eyes, held but one construction for Harry. He, in his turn, clutched the mantel-shelf and leaned his cold forehead on his hands. She looked at his back in helpless confusion.

"Harry . . . it's . . . it's not love as—you understand it—you and I. . . . I mean——"

He raised his head with a little caricature of a laugh.

"What on earth do you mean? How many kinds are there? A woman can't love two men at the same time."

"She can—she can! Ah, Harry—try to understand!" She leaned forward with clasped hands and wet earnest eyes. "I have never loved V-Val as—wanted him, I mean—for a husband. In that sense there is only you—has never been anybody else. But the rest of me—all the part you—you don't know, *won't* know—that—yes, yes I confess it. . . . I love Val—in that sense."

"So that's it." He muttered the words aloud unconsciously. Another was the cause of all the elusiveness he had not understood. Whether he wants to enter or no, a man with a strong sense of possession expects all the chambers of his wife's heart to be his. He alone must own the key—to use it or to allow it to rust, as he pleases.

He met her eyes, a hard light in his own. "You expect me—to understand this?—to countenance it? To share you with another?"

The sarcasm in his voice roused her quick temper. "Many women have to share their husbands—with another—in a different sense."

With an impatient gesture he turned to the fire.

"The excuse of 'One law for a man—another for a woman' won't hold nowadays," she went on. "Besides, you have all you want of me. I'm here, like—like the rest of the furniture."

"Leo!" Quickly he turned, seeming to tower over her in the semi-darkness. "What are you saying? This is all foolery. You are my wife—all of you—d'you understand?" Placing his hands on each arm of the chair he leaned down, as if instinctively closing her in from others. "Every bit. Where is this—this man, now?"

"South Africa."

"Have you met since—our marriage?"

"No."

"Ah! . . . Have you—corresponded?"

"Yes; we often write."

As if stung, he drew back sharply. Then, watching her closely, spoke with deadly deliberation. "And—if—I—forbid—this correspondence, *any* intercourse——"

"It will make no difference." Very clearly she spoke, throwing back her head and meeting his eyes defiantly. "Val means—represents too much to me of what you can never understand. If our friendship were wrong—disloyal in any way—I might obey you. But it is not; it is very—beautiful. You business men can not appreciate beauty. You thrust it deliberately out of your lives. Therefore you can not judge this question fairly."

"I can judge it sufficiently to insist upon my rights."

"Rights?" She laughed scornfully. "You have them already—all that you are entitled to. My soul is my own, so is my freedom of action. This is the twentieth century. You once assured me that you would be satisfied with what I could give. Well . . . I will *not* give—my friends."

She rose, but he caught her wrists again. He was breathing hard: "Suppose I make you?"

"You can't. How would that be possible?" With a sudden, nauseating suspicion, she flashed a look at him. "I never intended—deceit. But if there is any spying——"

"Spying?" He loosed her and recoiled. The loathing such a word conjured scattered his anger even as the dressing-gong just then scattered the silence of the big house. Leo moved into the shadows with a gesture of infinite weariness.

"It is no use our talking any more," she muttered hopelessly.

Looking at her drooping head, her extreme youth in comparison to himself melted other feelings into fear. She was going from him—into the shadows. . . . Into the danger of infatuation for this "actor-fellow" who had proved already his untrustworthiness. . . .

By a quick adroit movement he placed himself between her and the door.

"You can't go like this. What are you doing, Leo? What are you thinking of? . . . Don't—don't my wishes mean anything to you, now? If I am to believe you have cared for nobody as . . . that you care—care for me alone as——" He hesitated for words, and she caught his hand.

"It is the truth, Harry."

He gripped her hand and pulled her close. "Then surely—surely—you can give up others—mere 'friends'—if I wish it?"

She drew away impatiently, conscious once more of the

futility of explanations. Leaning against his writing-table she gazed vacantly at the outline of papers, ink-bottles, pens thereon. "Your wishes count with me, quite as much—more—than mine with you. But this is one which—I refuse to consider. Need we say any more about it?"

Only a hiss and splutter of burning log answered her. A flame leaped high, illuminating the dark room.

Turning suddenly round, the rigidity of his form, the trouble in his eyes, his set face, smote her heart. She dimly saw this matter from his standpoint. Stepping forward with quick impulse she laid her hands on his shoulders.

"Don't let this trouble you, Harry. You have my love still—all you want. It is only one of the many things we regard from different points of view."

He gave a mirthless laugh. "Not 'trouble me'? I'm to hear my wife's name dragged through the mud? To be told she loves another? Expected to be shared—— My God, Leo!" He seized her face between his hands, in a grip that made her wince, and drew it up close to his own. "What do you take me for? What are *you?* Yet—yet—you look at me with those pure eyes. *Where* are you? What world do you dwell in?" With more passion than he had ever exposed he pressed his lips upon hers, almost violently. It was the action of a thwarted animal, conscious of possession, stung into self-defense by the knowledge of lurking enemies. Then, as abruptly, he let her go and fumbled for the door-handle.

"Don't play with fire too much," he muttered. "I warn you. . . . There are some things no man can stand."

She made no reply. There was nothing more she could say. He must be left to his own view of the matter until some agency—human or divine—could open the other eyes of his nature and bring him understanding. Quickly, trembling in every limb, she slipped from the room.

CHAPTER IV

IF THE bottom fall out of one's world it may, with care, be replaced. But the fastenings are never secure. At any unexpected moment a nail becomes loose. One steps warily, with instinctive lack of faith.

Shocked, astounded, utterly bewildered, Harry could not tread upon the ground of his world with the same sure step. For the first time in his life he felt impotent. There seemed to be no way of dealing with this amazing situation. Anger with Leo for her defiance vied with fear for her own safety. Horror of the local scandal he could not silence encouraged the canker of mistrust rooted in his heart. And he mistrusted Leo's own trust in her dealings with this "friend." How much more of herself than she realized might not be his? How much, in the past? The sincerity of her avowal carried a certain conviction that eased part of the pain it caused. She had joined the man in purity of motive; but into what pitfall she had been decoyed she refused to divulge. It was this refusal that held the chief menace.

Yet, looking back—remembering her girlish fears, her frightened, shy surrender, the passionate, wondering cry: "Is this love?"—he trampled down the specters that rose and menaced him. That young bride rejoicing in the novelty of mutual possession—who had lain in his arms, clung to him as a wandering bird come to rest—had not the eyes of a woman with knowledge. . . . But the specters would not die like wasps beneath his foot. They crept slowly out again; crawled up once more into the light; taunted him

with memories which became distortions. . . . A strange fear had lurked behind her manner in London. . . . Why had she shown such anxiety for their marriage to be hastened?—*For it to lack publicity?* . . . Why was she so restlessly eager to be away with him, to belong to him? . . . In his infatuation he had put these things down to love for himself, loneliness, dislike of ostentation. Love! He ground his teeth savagely, faced by another specter—that with the green wings of jealousy. . . . What other motives, far removed from love for him—had caused all those fears and anxieties? This formed the cruelest specter of all. Harry hated it, struggled with it, hated himself because, though struggling, he could not utterly destroy it. . . .

The golf committee meeting took place without his presence that night. Dinner proved a dreary strained affair, only relieved by the presence of servants. Afterward he locked himself into his study, at the mercy of these phantoms, endeavoring vainly to adjust the shaking floor of his world. When, long after midnight, he went up-stairs Leo was asleep.

He stepped to her bedside and looked down upon her critically. Her face was flushed: her eyelids heavy as if from tears. Again the extreme youthfulness of her rounded limbs and delicately chiseled features appealed to his protectiveness, though causing him to wonder a little. Few girls of her age retained this almost childlike freshness. It seemed in some way untouched by the world—remote—elusive. As he looked upon her the specters slunk away, abashed. . . .

But where was Leo, in the land of sleep? She seemed very far away to-night, unusually remote. . . . What was that part of her which, she had declared, he did not want? It was the part possessed by another. Galling though the thought might be, Harry faced it squarely, with vague illu-

mination. He became dimly aware that his rival might not be one of flesh and blood alone. A rival *force* existed somewhere which enticed Leo from him: a force, too, that might ever elude him. . . . He laid his hand impulsively upon the bare arm flung outside the sheet.

Susie once in London—Valyran in a boat in Switzerland, realizing a loneliness of spirit—had cried to Leo to come back, and she had responded. And now Harry, conscious all at once of fear of her remoteness, bent down and murmured the same words.

But Leo went on sleeping. . . .

The law of respectability in Willerton ordained that married men should attend church with their wives on Sunday mornings, and play golf in the afternoon. Soothed by their naps during the Reverend Sam's sermon, forty winks after the midday meal proved unnecessary. This saved time. In the fulness of the Lord's approval and of their Sunday joint, they could at once go and revolve round the links. If any husbands failed to observe the first half of the program, their wives saved the household from disrepute. This formed part of their duty.

Harry had fallen nicely into line with this arrangement. But in strange contradiction to the unwritten law, the husband in this case usually saved the household's reputation. Leo's irregular attendance had been frequently the source of much internal contention and external disapproval. It pained Willerton to see a man alone during one of the sacred moments when he wanted his wife's company. "It's not as if she has to cook his dinner," Mr. Kerry said. About once in three weeks, however, Leo satisfied propriety by appearing at her husband's side.

Last Sunday had been what she called her duty one. When she joined Harry in the hall this next week, too, he raised surprised eyebrows. She had not appeared at break-

fast. A peculiar look of determination mingled with embarrassment on her face as she threw him a careless greeting. Similarly embarrassed, he found it physically impossible to step forward with any warmth of welcome. Leo, he saw at once, had shut the door firmly upon last night's conversation: she would offer no further aid in his struggle with specters. . . . They left the house in silence.

"It's going to be a fine day," she remarked half-way down the drive.

"I think it is," he replied politely. . . .

In the lane it was a relief to meet Mrs. Bolten. Harry greeted her with a cordiality that warmed the chief widow's heart. But Mrs. Bolten felt terribly embarrassed. Since Friday she had thought of little else, and talked of little else, but Mrs. Blake's revelation. Until she knew what line of conduct would be adopted by the Merleys and others, it was most awkward to be seen in this company. However, feeling at least ran high in "poor Henry Wallis's" favor: there could be no harm in talking to *him*. So Mrs. Bolten walked on his far side, and engaged him in her usual style of conversation. This was one designed to remind him of their long acquaintance, their mutual friends, her own familiarity with people one ought to know. Quite naturally, therefore, it left out his wife without any obviousness.

Leo wondered if this sort of talk really caused Harry any interest, that he looked so absorbed? Val would have caught her eye with one of his vivid little sidelong glances, and they would have shared the humor. Now, she felt cut off, isolated, slightly taboo. . . . And only the strongest sense of duty had brought her here.

Words between people with different points of view resembled bundles of seaweed in a rough sea which rolled them over and over, swirling them around, so that they lashed each other and their own main stem, involving all

loose matter within reach in their own confusion. By deed not word Harry should learn that his wishes did count, that her love remained his, that she had spoken the truth.

The Reverend Sam preached a nice little sermon upon Unselfishness. Leo and Harry watched his face and thought about each other. The rest of the congregation watched his face and thought about Leo and Harry and the new bunker at the fourth hole.

Perhaps, like the violet in the desert, these ten minutes were not entirely wasted on the air. But Leo, rising to join in the hymn to the accompaniment of a mediocre organ, was conscious of feeling very far from those other Realities behind the Veil.

"I wonder why?" she thought. "I feel it most—here. What's wrong?"

In little groups the congregation sauntered down the church path to their waiting limousines and saloons. A few, whose houses were close, loitered to ease their minds to each other over domestic troubles. . . . With curling lip Leo acknowledged the frigid greeting of those too close to ignore her. But as she walked home—leaving Harry to his duty of counting the collection—the humorous view of this attitude came to her aid.

"If Barley returned they would forget all about it!" she reflected. "It would be fun to watch them then. . . . It was before." . . .

One can not get far with a bridge if the opposite side of the gulf is barricaded. Harry appeared, to Leo, to have raised a high barricade behind which his movements were utterly concealed. Humor, in such circumstances, soon wears thin. She was thrown entirely back upon herself, for Willerton was passing once more through a period of strict prudence. The line of action needed careful consideration. The Merleys had been sounded. They thought the affair

"*disgusting,* of course." But it provided much food for their wit. They "simply screamed" when they heard. . . . "Absolutely priceless! . . . No; one *couldn't* invite her to anything, to meet people. . . . Suppose the case ended in the divorce courts? It was awkward, because Wallis was quite decent—rode straight. . . . Still, you know. . . . What a *scream* when the Bottreux-Barlingtons heard! They were so exclusive. What a pity they were in Italy now. . . ." Olive decided to write.

Harry was painfully aware of the attitude of mind all round. It infuriated his own sense of impotency. Leo's ready compliance nowadays with his every little wish infuriated him the more. She had never shown so much consideration over his creature comforts. His favorite dishes appeared at every meal. His tastes were consulted on every slightest point. A few weeks ago all this would have caused him the warmest satisfaction. In past conflicts of will, only sheer mastery—the dominion of the male over his mate—had gained him the victory. But all these instincts of dominion had strangely lost their force. They had been overpowered by another—that unknown force which dominated Leo with its strange and stronger power; and—most galling of all to a man of his temperament—the force of which another held the secret. This galling impotence colored all his thoughts; haunted his working hours; accompanied him, with all the other specters, to trade conferences; caused his work to lose half its flavor. . . .

The unbearable knowledge of being shared had the effect of cold water on warm coals. It quenched Harry's physical ardor. His instincts of possession, proving thus hollow, faded somewhat. He became an easier prey to the specters and to the insects of mistrust; inclined to be morose, irritable, more and more shut up in his own reserve.

Perhaps the hardest moment of his life arrived one

morning with the advent of a thin envelope bearing the South African post-mark. Leo was not yet down. The letter, as if addressed by a pen dipped in fire, not ink, blazed up mockingly at Harry from the table. For a moment he clenched his hands as though to prevent their seizing the envelope and tearing it to shreds; but without a tremor of countenance he took his seat. While being served, all the specters crowded round his brain; the insects gnawed their way into his heart.

"You are a fool!—a fool!—a fool!" Voices seemed to mock at him. Directly he was alone he leaned forward and picked up the letter. "Burn—burn—burn," urged the voices. "Your rights—insist upon your rights. . . ."

Harry's forefingers and thumbs closed spasmodically upon the top of the envelope. He pushed back his chair, with an instinctive glance toward the fireplace. . . . Then, with a gesture of horrified contempt—of self-loathing unspeakable—he flung the letter down again. Placing his elbows on the table, he hid his eyes for several moments with his hands. . . .

Leo presently entered, but noticed nothing unusual. He had finished a scanty breakfast, and he rose, newspaper in hand. She hesitated before him, then raised her face and kissed him on the cheek. He made no response. With an impatient sigh she turned to the table.

"Your letter . . .from South Africa." Something goaded Harry into speech—the first reference to the subject since the evening in his study.

She turned and looked straight into those cold light eyes, conscious of a sinking feeling at her heart. Would it never be possible to make him understand? Could she never unite him and Val—a symbol of the unity of those two Reals that both meant to her so much? For a moment she held the envelope in her hands, tapping it with an ab-

sent-minded finger. All at once, with a sudden resolve, she thrust it toward him.

"Harry . . . will you read this letter?"

He was totally unaware of the impulse prompting her action. It seemed to intensify the self-loathing and contempt he had just suffered. Horrified at having thus revealed the jealousy and mistrust he could not stifle, he made a gesture almost of revulsion.

"No—no . . . I—it's not for me. . . . Certainly not." And hurriedly gathering together his own letters he left the room.

Leo frowned in bewilderment. Superbly confident in her own honesty of purpose, she had no idea of the existence of those specters torturing Harry. His anger at her defiance over renouncing Val's friendship she realized, and that, with Val's aid, she hoped some day to destroy. But during the months of their marriage Harry had been content with the love she had given him and was prepared still to give. Had his pride allowed him to burst through his reserve, and to show his realization of its one-sidedness, a whole world of difference would have been made in their lives.

She tore open the letter that she had been within an ace of not receiving, and Val's words obliterated all other things from her mind.

Leo was not to answer this letter; he would have left for England before it reached her. His present contract was ended. Early in April, for three nights only, he would sing "Midir" in London. Leo would come up for that? She would not fail to come? . . .

Fail? Every atom of her consciousness seemed to rise like bits of sand in a warm wind, and to whirl round in the ecstasy of air, light, sunshine. . . *Fail?* Does a parched tree fail to respond to the shower that refreshes? Does a

half-starved dog fail when food is offered? Does a flower fail its sun? . . .

A sensitive nature must have warmth. In cold draughts it shrivels behind furled leaves.

Warmth now penetrated Leo's self-protective leaves of aloofness. She would bask again in the full sunlight of perfect understanding. What did little local shadows matter? As she went about the countryside to-day she resolutely ignored the ostracism that had infuriated her. Who minds gnats when the crests of mountains once more can be seen emerging from the mists?

When Harry returned at night her gaiety—so long subdued that he had forgotten its charm—caused him some surprise. It thawed a little of his own frigidity. But halfway through dinner, with the suddenness of a thunderbolt, with right intuition but wrong inference, he realized its origin. . . . The thunderbolt pressed heavily upon the table during the remainder of the meal. . . .

To-night, alone in his study, a new train of thought, originating in Leo's renewed spirits, took shape, in opposition to the appalling strength of the spectral army. This return of gay inconsequence brought an echo of the fascination it had held for him in the past. For the first time he consciously realized the change in Leo's demeanor of late. The light in her eyes had turned to wistfulness: the upward tilt of laughter-loving lips had become a pensive droop. These were outward signs of a difference—a bitterness—he felt within. And for the first time he sought his own heart for the cause.

Harry was a just man. For any narrowness his upbringing was responsible. And narrowness formed but a cloak, not the real figure beneath. When once a foreign train of thought penetrated his usual line of vision, he gave it full investigation.

And now strange new thoughts accompanied him to his work, to his trade conferences, and to his innumerable meetings. They were thoughts about women—about womanhood—about his own wife in the aspect of woman. Not long ago he would have laughed at some of these thoughts. Now they recurred with increasing significance to his mind. Uncertainty concerning the relation of womanhood and manhood began to tinge them with yet newer, subtler ideas. "My soul is my own—and my freedom of action," Leo had declared. The words rose and danced before his eyes, when, bewildered, he sat alone pondering. He began to wonder why he—together with hundreds of others—had taken woman's subjection to a husband for a natural presumption. "One law for a man, another for a woman"—he had never consciously imagined such a thing. But could he be sure the thought had not lain among the subconscious laws of his mind, coloring his outlook? "Legal mistress"—he had called the remark vulgar. With a flush, he faced it now in the new light that was slowly penetrating the cobwebs of middle-class complacency. Facts are often ugly, he himself had averred. And now, mentally, casting an eye over the married lives of many he knew, he embraced this fact, feeling horribly ashamed. . . .

These thoughts spread, unconscious leaven working within his soul, causing a new light to be thrown upon his reflections over all the past little scenes of discord. Gradually he fitted these together, links in a chain whose shape was becoming dimly apparent to him from a woman's point of view—a woman who was his wife.

And, striking the chain with hammering insistence, sounded Leo's old passionate cry of "More." . . .

But another had responded to that cry.

And at this point all the spectral army rose in its strength, putting to flight the other thoughts.

CHAPTER V

WITH commendable self-restraint Bevvie had refrained from writing to his "little country girl" after his return to Oxford. But he thought about her quite a lot—even to the extent of paying less attention to local petticoats. "It helps to keep a fellow straight—knowing a girl like that," he confided to a roomful of less balanced young men.

When, therefore, Bevvie came home and received from Arnie a full account of "*the* latest," his "Jove!" carried all the passion of a soul's disillusion. The story had become very full by this time—detail had been piled upon detail. Bevvie was horrified. Naturally he admired men whose morals were not those of the Sunday-school. A flirtation with a married woman was rather smart. Though an elopement contained too much responsibility to be attractive, it proved a chap to be the very dickens of a fellow. Bevvie liked to be considered hot stuff himself. But women—they were, of course, entirely different. A woman who cheapened herself was a menace to the community. Bevvie felt very glad he had refrained from writing. This had been, he considered, a narrow escape. He decided it would be wise not to appear alone upon the links. For, once given encouragement, girls often proved uncomfortably tenacious. . . . His safety seemed to hang by a hair's-breadth when, late one afternoon, he met Leo riding round a corner near the gates of Elm Grange. She called a cheery greeting and showed signs of reining in. But Bevvie knew the quickest way out of any emergency—flight. Hastily rais-

ing his hat, he beat a retreat up the drive to the sanctuary of home. When the sound of horse's hoofs died away, he mopped his brow. It wasn't at all wet, but to mop it seemed the correct thing to do.

Leo gave a little snort of contempt. This was typical of the neighborhood's present behavior. It increased her impatience for April . . . and Val . . .

She rode on to the vicarage, where Susie and the twins had just returned after several weeks' recuperation with Susie's mother. Away from the local hornet's nest Susie, Leo felt, would be unbiased by public opinion. It would be possible to raise the taboo upon Val's name, and to talk sensibly to Susan.

But Leo reckoned without her host. The Reverend Sam had not been away. His flock had not been left unprotected, at the mercy of evil-doers. He was neck-deep in the flood of public opinion. Directly Leo entered the vicarage she became conscious of Susie's bias, by her embarrassment. Leo kissed her, and kissed her godchildren. She tried her hardest to think of suitable remarks upon their growth and beauty. But she mistook the girl for the boy, and said he looked every inch a parson already.

For some reason Susan seemed annoyed. "Girls can't be parsons!" she remarked tartly. "Take them out now, Kitty. . . ."

Leo threw down her gloves and led the attack. "Well, Su? I see you have heard all the clatter?"

Susan turned scarlet. "It's *dreadful!*" she murmured. "Dreadful! What will happen, Leo? What shall you do? I—I warned you."

"For goodness' sake don't take up the 'I told you so' attitude!" Leo sprang to her feet, her nerves on edge, and stood on the hearth-rug back to the fire. "It's not my action that is wrong; it's the putrid minds of other people. They

can see nothing but mud in anything beyond their own horizons. Personally I don't care that much"—snapping her fingers—"but it's—Harry. I know he feels it all."

"He—knows?" Susan's eyes widened with horrified amazement.

"Oh, yes. Of course he knows." She flicked her boot with her riding-crop, and frowned at the hearth-rug.

Susie's breath seemed to ooze away in long gasps. "What *is* he going to do?" she cried at last.

"Do? What could he do? There has been a bit of a breeze, of course."

"But . . . does he understand that—you know what I mean?—does he realize you were—were only friends?"

Leo's careless shrug belied the momentary longing in her eyes. "He can't understand. But I think he—believes." She turned and looked down pensively into the fire. "I sometimes wonder if Val and I shall ever make him understand our——"

"But that is all finished now?" Susie gazed at the boyish back in fresh horror. "You surely don't still care——"

"Of course I do."

"Leo! How can you? How—*dare* you? A married woman ought not to care for other men."

"Tut! Why shouldn't married women have friends?" She swung round impatiently. "For out-and-out stuffiness this neighborhood takes the bun! It needs a new war, a few bombs. Oh, my God! Sometimes I think its smugness will send me mad . . . or—or drive me into doing something desperate!" She strode across to the window, like some trapped bird, and beat a tattoo on the pane. "The only life here is that of the senses. We eat, drink, sleep, exercise, eat, drink, sleep—and talk about each other's clothes and money. . . . Is that all? Is that all? Are physical comforts all that matter? Haven't we souls? Aren't they real, too?

Mine is stifled, stifled! It only gets air from books—or from Val's letters."

"Leo! . . . Leo!" Susan stemmed this outburst in consternation. "Why are you still so—turbulent? Of course we have souls. But doesn't the Church satisfy them? Books are often so dangerous. Besides, surely you love your husband?"

"Oh, yes, yes. But——"

"Well. . . . Isn't love a—I think Sam called it, in his beautiful way, 'a window of the soul.' Doesn't that let in —'air'? I hoped, when you married and settled down, your restlessness would cease."

"Settle down?" Leo laughed harshly. "That is the root of the whole matter. The world is continually changing, advancing, moving. . . . It's *alive*. Yet Humanity, after a few paltry years, is expected to settle down in one little rut. We are all to make gods of—*things*. To—to worship our own stomachs, to bind our horizon with bricks and mortar. It applies to spiritual matters, too. Moses or Methuselah or Noah had an idea; and for the rest of the world's evolution mankind is to remain settled down in that old idea. If, after all the discoveries and advances made by science, other people have ideas and write them down, you call them dangerous."

"They are dangerous." Susan would be loyal to her last breath. "The Bible tells us all we ought to know. But I can't argue—I'm not clever enough. Would you like to talk to Sam some time, Leo? . . . What *is* the matter?"

Leo had raised her arms across the window-pane and leaned her head upon them. "I want to get back—oh, I want to get back," she muttered brokenly.

"Back? Where? What do you mean? Not to—to that—man——"

The girl had apparently not heard the words. Dropping

one arm she stood motionless, in a splash of sunshine—a slim figure in riding-breeches and fawn coat—gazing at some bushes in the garden whence came the ecstatic thrill of a thrush. Something of the old remoteness—that which had seemed almost fey—surrounded her, causing Susie to break off, with the strange feeling of desolation she had felt in London.

"Leo!" she cried—sharply, because fearfully—"aren't you happy—now?"

Leo appeared to return from somewhere. She glanced round, smiling faintly. "Happy? Yes. *Yes.* Of course. But—it's not the same happiness. I—I've lost touch. . . Susie, d'you remember. . . I tried to explain in London about a kind of spiritual wireless? Contact with the real spirit of beauty. . . . Oh, it's difficult to put into words." . . . She turned back to the window. "I told you Val was a kind of transmitter. Without him I'm—I'm out of touch."

"But. . . . My dear! . . . Your husband——"

"Marriage, about here, seems to throw one yet more out of touch."

"Oh, Leo!" Susie's voice became horror-stricken again.

Leo turned back into the room. "You don't understand this—dual affection? I love Harry, Su. He's very dear to me. And I *could* love him. . . . Ah!" She waved an arm, as if to indicate limitless freedom; then dropped it, with a shrug. "It's not the kind of love—a—practical man wants. He won't allow the gulf between the material and the spiritual—to be bridged." She tapped her boot again thoughtfully for a moment, then looked up with a quick laugh. "Well? More mystified than ever, Su?"

Susan leaned forward in her chair with hands clasped, and gazed into the fire. To her simple credulous nature, with its old-fashioned instincts of subjection, these startling remarks from another wife savored of sacrilege.

"I think," she began slowly, "you fail to understand the sacredness of marriage vows. A man loves his wife according to his nature. Be careful, Leo, not to lose that love."

"Why?" Leo uttered a contemptuous laugh. "Because I refuse to settle down into a rut of—of—materialism? Because I want to give so much more—and to receive so much more—than the—merely physical? Is any other love worth keeping? A woman's is supposed to survive all tests. Why not a man's too? A woman has a nature to be considered."

Susan felt too much bewildered by these ideas to do more than murmur, "Men are different, dear."

"Ss!" Leo positively hissed with contempt. "They must realize the difference then, and meet women half-way. That's fair play, isn't it? This provincial life is turning me into a feminist! A woman is supposed to give up her whole life to serving a man's bodily needs; then she is called a good wife! I'd sooner be a cabbage than a good wife! If a man houses and feeds her comfortably in return, he is considered a good husband. Puff!" She gave an inoffensive chair a cut with her whip. "And you would all sit by and let him go to the devil if he wished, and call it his nature? Oh, Susie! Susie! To me love means so much more . . . more . . . *more!* . . . Well, I must go. Don't look so utterly like a codfish opening its mouth for the bait, old thing."

Susan's brain was reeling. She rose slowly, incapable of any argument to meet this torrent. Leo laughed at her expression, and picked up her gloves.

"I hope Kitty Marten and the pram are quite a success?" she asked, to turn the subject.

Susie flushed. "Yes—yes. Quite. . . . But. . . . Oh, Leo! Sam is so—so horrified about—about——"

"Me?" Leo's face hardened again. She quickly perceived something more lay behind Sam's horror. "Well! What if he is?"

Susan was fidgeting with cretonne chair covers.

"He—I hate to tell you. . . . It seems so ungrateful. . . . He doesn't think we ought to keep—accept—presents from you. . . . Oh, Leo——"

Leo stared, her face livid with anger, the red lights dancing in her eyes. But, before she could find breath to speak, the door opened and Mr. Murray came in. Susie gave a little gasp of fear, and clasped her hands. Her husband hesitated on the threshold, uncertain how to act in this unexpected encounter. His entry took place at the worst possible moment, for Leo's anger was at its height. She turned upon him, and threw back her head.

"I understand you refuse to accept—gifts—from me?"

"I—oh—er . . . Mrs. Wallis. . . . This is very hasty. . . . I . . . I had not decided yet——"

"It would be touching pitch? You listen to scandalous tittle-tattle and condemn me unheard? That is—religion?"

The Reverend Sam, very red in the face, had by this time somewhat recovered his wits. He held up a clerical hand. "Mrs. Wallis! Kindly allow me a word. The—story I was told has upset me exceedingly, especially as you are—were—my wife's friend. She could not deny it. But I shall be delighted if you can offer any contradiction, any explanation."

"Certainly not. I have no intention of offering a defense for what does not need one. It is entirely my own business." She turned to the door. "You serve a queer God, Mr. Murray."

"Leo!" Susie cried; then clutched her husband's arm in terrified appeal.

With her hand on the door-knob, Leo faced the pair. "It might be wiser, when making your decision, to consider Susie, not me. *Although* she is your wife, she surely deserves some consideration. Or is it against the laws of

your God?" Her biting sarcasm caused the man's red face to fade in patches into white. No woman had ever before spoken to him in this manner. Amazement and anger mixed with wounded vanity to deprive him of all but a stutter. And during that stutter the door opened, shut again with ominous decision, and Leo was gone.

That night a train of new thoughts took root in her mind too. As Harry's were about woman, so hers were about man. But they were very different from his. His were softening, purifying; hers were bitter, cynical, hardening. . . . She began to watch him coldly, critically, with a queer impersonal detachment. Had Susie's hint any foundation? Was a man's love of such little account as to be killed by any frustration of will? Was it merely dross, thrown off when the metal was tested? Harry's reserved cold politeness took on new significance. And it roused, not fear, but scorn; not misery, but bitterness. The scorn she felt of late for Bevvie, Sam, the neighborhood generally seemed to be accumulated into this, reaching its zenith. One little frost on top of another had closed all the sensitive buds only waiting for the sun to warm them into flower.

Into this new bitterness, as into her desolation weeks ago in the Merleys' drawing-room, dropped the thought of another.

The love of a friend had not turned to dross. Once she thought it had. . . . But through all those menacing flames of passion, through her own subsequent cruelty, through months of estrangement, the love in Val's friendship had not failed.

The reflection warmed her heart; glowed in her veins like a draught of wine after a cold journey; held a subtle enticement she dared not formulate.

She wondered which of these two loves formed the real? In the light of this discovery could there be any doubt?

In the perturbed state of his mind Harry had instinctively drawn away from Leo, refusing to grasp the hands she had so pitifully stretched out across the widening gulf. Now she drew away from him. As before she had drifted away spiritually, so now she deliberately shrank away physically. Her old fastidious horror of sex unsanctified by love asserted itself, causing a repugnant fear of becoming the thing she detested.

Harry quickly noticed this new change. He resented it. The dominant male raised its head once more, urging him with its cry of "Rights." The new bewildering conception of a woman's "Rights" too, restrained him from action or comment.

The communicating door closed between them with ever firmer latch. . . . It seemed to Leo, to close at the same time between the two realities she had tried vainly to unite.

April found them thus, one on either side. And unexpected business, demanding Harry's presence on the Continent for a fortnight, brought a sense of relief to both. The strain was fraying Leo's temper and nerves. She felt glad that he made no suggestion of her accompanying him. He, on his side, half hoped the suggestion might come from herself. But until the morning of his departure she made no reference to her own actions. On that morning, among her letters—which now he avoided like the plague—lay one whose contents caused a light to shine in her eyes. He noticed the light, and, coming thus at the moment of parting, it sent a bleak sense of disappointment creeping round his heart.

"While you are away, Harry, I may go to London for a blow," she said cheerfully.

"For—— Oh, yes!" He never thwarted any designs now. He no longer lived "in the Ark." He struggled in the flood. "A good idea," he remarked. "It will do you good."

"Yes—it—*will.*" The warm assurance in the words intensified his inner coldness. He drank his coffee, rose, and turned away to light a cigarette.

"Where shall you stay? With friends? Or——"

"Oh, I don't know yet. I have made no plans."

A few months ago Harry would have objected to this casual independence. Now he merely remarked: "I must have your address."

"Why?"

He blew out some smoke impatiently, and frowned. "Why? Why? Surely I am . . . Naturally I shall want to know where you are."

"I can't tell you, because I don't know yet myself. . . . Is that your car at the door?"

"You can write as soon as you have decided."

"Very well." She walked to the window. "It is the car Good-by, Harry! I hope you'll have a good crossing."

With a feeling of desolation that was exasperating he strode to the door. There, with his hand on the knob, he stopped irresolutely and looked back. She was standing in a blaze of spring sunlight, and her eyes were remote. A nameless uneasiness warred with his reserve. Pomfrey's footsteps resounded in the hall. . . . With unusual impulse Harry went quickly back to the figure near the window.

"Is that all your—good-by, Leo?"

She looked up—absent-mindedly, he thought. "Why? . . . Here's Pomfrey. Don't miss your train, Harry."

Without another word he turned and left the room.

Presently, from the window, Leo saw the car round the corner of the house and disappear down the drive. She gave a sigh, as if dismissing the shadow that had momentarily fallen across the window, and seating herself on the window-seat she reopened her letter.

It bore the London post-mark.

CHAPTER VI

MR. MILNE had naturally shared local opinion upon the latest scandal to a peculiar degree. His sympathy for his partner was so intense that one day it burst into speech. Such rashness had never been repeated. However much polished, one does not risk being frozen a second time. . . But his admiration for Wallis eradicated the stains of Leo's guilt sufficiently to allow of conversation. When he saw her on the platform of Cuvingham Station he, therefore, made every effort to do the correct thing. He stationed himself beside her and talked about the weather. She was abstracted, he noticed—peculiarly, even rudely, abstracted. . . . She scarcely appeared to share his polite pleasure over the privilege of traveling to London together. For some reason, when the train came in, she insisted upon entering a carriage marked "Ladies Only." Mr. Milne would not have taken her for that type of girl.

However, from his smoker down the same corridor, he was able to appear at her door several times to ask to be allowed to do something—to offer a paper or order a tea-basket. Each time Leo bumped back to earth with a perceptible start. Each time Mr. Milne wondered, behind his patronizing smile, whatever women found to think about during a journey of nearly two hours, that they could ignore the opportunity for newspaper study. Minds probably stuffed with hats. . . .

Now, at last, the world of Kerrys, Hawkeses and Milnes, faded away. A sense of their unreality possessed Leo in the taxi that drove her from her hotel. Back in the

glow of light shining from the portals of home, the outside world of frost and little troublesome stones faded into a dull memory.

The auditorium was filling rapidly. The sound of tuning strings combined with the hum of voices and the flutter of programs to quicken yet more the thrill of expectancy that ran down her veins. She glanced across at the members of the orchestra, at the footlights, and the long curtain, and a sigh of exulting content burst from her lips.

In a commercial age that would extinguish pure art much as the city's garish lights extinguish those of the heavens, this music-drama, with its ethereal beauty, its romance of mysticism, is a star which, once risen, never sets in the souls of those drawn beneath its spell. Their souls acclaim the Immortal Prince from the Hidden "Land of Youth," and follow his beckoning hand to the world of the Lordly Ones, where all is beautiful.

Since receiving Val's last letter, Leo, without the constraint of Harry's presence, had withdrawn almost entirely from the chilly alien world around her. Now, the introductory bars of strings, into which the clarinet breathes the quest of the "Immortal Hour," shattered the fetters binding her spirit. It rose with the rising curtain, and danced among the trees with the spirits of the wood. The dark figure of "Dalua," whose shadow means forgetfulness, seemed to wave his shadow over her too. She forgot the facts of life that had proved ugly. Once more beauty stirred ecstatically within her heart.

Then "Etain" came—Princess strayed from the Land of Youth into the world of mortal men, longing for she knew not what—love that was mortal, passion bitter-sweet. And "Dalua's" shadow caused her to forget "Midir," her Immortal Lover. Subtly identified, Leo's personality wandered away through the wood with the wandering fairy fig-

ure. Again, later, with the Mortal King, led by his dreams in quest of the beauty that is immortal—the love that is not to be found in human passion—she followed the command of "Dalua," resounding among the trees. It seemed to be her own soul which went forth on its eternal quest; her own soul yearning for the completeness of Infinity in a world that is finite.

The fall of the curtain scarcely broke the spell. She sat perfectly still, unconscious of her surroundings. In the second act, safe in the hut in the wood, she listened with "Etain" to the storm lashing the trees without. When the King entered, she too warred the eternal conflict between the spiritual and the material. She felt the passion, the magnetism of the King's love sweep her away from the old ideals, the old loves; conquer the vague faint memories. With "Etain" she drifted, in passionate surrender, into the shelter of his arms—a wandering bird seeking rest in a nest that would surely prove but a cage. . . . And then, with the Princess, she heard afar off—unheard by the Mortal King—the light, elusive singing of the unseen hosts—the Lordly Ones—as they swept through the wood.

The figures on the stage faded from before her eyes with the lowered curtain. In their place rose a moonlit lake encircled by snow-capped mountains. . . .

During the interval her heart remained with "Etain," during the year's conflict in her soul concealed in this short space of time—the conflict between two compelling forces.

And at last, amid the pomp and brilliance of her Court, the white-faced Queen, limbs fettered by heavy robes, head weighted by the crown she wore, descended the palace steps and took her seat upon the throne. With infinite weariness she responded to her kingly husband's love. With tired patience she carried out his wishes to address the acclaiming throng, to fulfill the exactions of this earthly state. A

fragile fairy figure among the stalwart forms around, she finally withdrew slowly amid the high pillars of the palace.

For the first time in the scene Leo looked closely at the King, left alone upon his throne, when the courtiers one by one retired for the night. His was a solitary figure and a noble one. A wave of pity flooded her heart. . . . But pity and all thought of the King suddenly evaporated. She gripped the arms of her seat and leaned forward in voiceless welcome. Every fiber of her being seemed to quiver a welcome to the form all at once silhouetted against the night sky without the Palace portals. Clad in pale, mystical green and silver that now and then flashed golden in a light strangely unearthly, he descended from unknown heights, vanished for a moment behind a pillar, then stood revealed upon the threshold—"Midir," Prince of the Hidden People, come from the "Land of Youth," the World of Love, to hail the Mortal King.

Leo caught her breath in what was almost a sob. Tall, slender, his own air of ethereality subtly enhanced, the contrast between the two—the contrast between earthly beauty and the beauty that is spiritual—struck her forcibly. Then the voice she loved—each tone of velvety softness, yet pure and liquid as water rippling over crystals—greeted once more her ears. . . .

Long ago Val had promised to sing to her—to *her*—in a crowd. Clasping both hands she gazed across the intervening space into the deep eyes glowing strangely in the unearthly pallor of his face. His grace of bearing, the peculiar radiance of his personality, the superb ease of carriage and gesture, magnetized her. As in a dream, she listened to his impassioned song of the birth of "Cengus," Lord of Love. As in a dream she heard his request to sing unto the Queen. While "Etain" was fetched, the two figures waited alone in the Palace Hall. And the tense drama of that mo-

ment when the two big forces materialized—one seated on an earthly throne; the other, in a glow of light upon the threshold, half turned to the unknown World Beyond; each waiting in silence for the struggle over the soul each claimed—held her spellbound. . . . The Queen returned, her regal robes discarded.

"Midir" stepped forward into the land of mortal men; and into the hush of the Palace Hall, stole the liquid notes of a harp. Once again Leo was transported to where mountain peaks closed in the world beyond the encircling clouds; to where the silence of the night was broken only by the lilt of fairy music and a voice soft almost to a whisper:

"How beautiful they are,
The Lordly Ones
Who dwell in the hills,
In the hollow hills.

"They have faces like flowers,
And their breath is a wind
That blows over summer meadows
Filled with dewy clover.

"Their limbs are more white
Than shafts of moonshine:
They are more fleet
Than the March wind.

"They laugh and are glad
And are terrible:
When their lances shake and glitter
Every green reed quivers.

"How beautiful they are,
How beautiful
The Lordly Ones
In the hollow hills."

The spirit of the girl sitting alone among the crowd leaped forth at the appeal whose impassioned force lay only in suggestion. The barriers erected of late around her soul crashed, allowing her, metaphorically, to take the decisive step forward that she had been withheld from taking before. Any lingering doubts of the truth in other realities than those understood by Willerton, fled. She knew now. . . . She *knew*. . . . Her will urged forward the Queen's uncertainty. With rising passion, yet never seeking to touch the girl's bodily frame, "Midir" declared his identity and his immunity from death—moving slowly back toward the freedom of the world whence he came.

A voice within Leo urged on the Queen's awakening consciousness: "Go!" it cried. "Go . . . 'Etain' . . . go."

Echoing her cry, "Midir" flung forth his last appeal—the appeal that was also a command:

"Come— 'Etain'—come——"

Every cell of memory now flooded with light, the Queen followed his beckoning hand, and Leo's spirit again leaped ahead. Out through the Palace portals, into the shadowy night, up, up, to the infinite spaces far out of sight, she followed the figure bathed in light—away to the "hollow hills."

With the light rapture of butterflies mad with summer sun, the grace of foamy crests on wild waves, of thistledown whirling in the sunshine, the exultant welcome of the unseen hosts—the Lordly Ones—floated down from the clouds and flooded the Palace Hall. As if from far away, Leo looked back upon the Mortal King left with nothing now save mortal's death.

And another stab of pity shot through her heart.

When the curtain fell, she sat still among the bustle of departure, clutching the arms of her seat, her eyes shining and remote. Presently an attendant approached. Still in a

dream the girl heard her own voice answering questions, felt her limbs move, found herself being led down passages, past doors and groups of people. . . . Until at last a door opened and closed behind her. . . . A figure in silver-green hurried forward. . . .

There are moments when the world seems arrested in its course when everything slips away under the shadow of "Dalua." . . .

When the world leaped on again, Leo found herself clinging to Val's shoulders, her face muffled in his cloak, crying absurdly, weakly, childishly. She realized the absurdity, yet at the same time felt powerless to stop. The rapture of the homing bird surged through her heart, through her tears, up to her lips. Throwing back her head she encountered the same rapture in his eyes. Unashamed of tears, with the old trustful simplicity she raised her face, and he bent his down. The lips she met were trembling as much as her own. . . .

Preconceived ideas of reunion seldom come to pass. All the carefully planned remarks, the heroic calmness of mien, avoidance of pitfalls, are swept away by the avalanche of circumstance. Valyran could only fold his cloak around her shaking figure, and hide his face in her hair. . . .

At last, lingeringly, they drew apart and looked upon each other, hands clasped.

"Val!" she whispered unsteadily. "We—are home again."

"Home again," he echoed, beneath his breath.

With a tremulous laugh Leo dropped his hands. She raised her own and dabbed her eyes; then sank into the chair he indicated. Between the dabs she watched him sweep, with his usual free action, a crowd of jars and pots from the dressing-table, and seat himself upon the edge. Smiling he leaned down and captured the fingers clutching the wisp of handkerchief. Then he looked at her shrewdly.

"What has become of my—sprite?" he muttered, half to himself. His glance fell on the wedding-ring, encircling a finger of the hand he held. For a long moment neither spoke. He seemed fascinated by that plain gold band. . . . Leo, in her turn, examined him shrewdly. His cheeks were, she fancied, more hollow than of old. Or was that the result of make-up? He had removed the silver helmet, and his dark hair clustered with its usual boyish carelessness about his brow. She was conscious of his personality pervading her own in the old strange way, with its sensation of familiarity, of *oneness*. The banality of ordinary words of greeting kept both silent.

Presently he sat up with a jerk of the shoulders as if throwing something off. "Well! . . . There's such a deuce of a lot to say. . . . Where are we to begin? A day in the country to-morrow is indicated—don't you think? Will you? Are—are you alone, or——"

"Harry is in Paris on business. . . . Yes, Val—a long day together. Ah! won't it be—perfect!" She drew a breath of pure happiness, causing him to look at her quickly again.

"I want to hear all about Mrs. Kerry's inside. I love her!" he announced unexpectedly.

The careless words brought memory, like a cold wind, back to Leo's mind. Her world lay not in this warm security of homelike understanding, but outside, amid frost and snow and petty friction. A spasm of pain crossed her face, which he noticed. He noticed too the sudden droop of her lips. For a long moment he waited silently.

"Gulfs still yawning?" he asked at last.

The gentleness of his voice broke down the barriers she had erected round her heart. With a little exclamation she drew the hand holding her own up to her cheek.

"Wider than ever, Val," she muttered brokenly. "I

can't move without falling into one. But I *must* keep to my own side! I must! I must! I knew that to-night, when you sang . . . that song. . . Ah! let me forget. Just to-night and to-morrow. You—you and me—again. . . . It is so wonderful."

Her broken voice trailed away and he felt the dampness of renewed tears upon his fingers.

A year ago this passionate warmth of meeting would have set Val's senses reeling in a riot of mad wild hopes. All the gates of his own emotions would have been broken down, allowing the flood's admittance. But months of hell and purgatory season the timber of those gates—even add unexpected extra bars. They purge the floods too of refuse. To the penetrating eyes of love Leo's letters had revealed much. By the exquisite sense of oneness he understood exactly how much and—also—how little, this agitation signified.

"I know," he said, caressing her hair with his free hand, "I know."

Presently he sat back, with whimsical laugh. "The devil loves to push you and me over the brink of a gulf! Something must be done to stop his little game. My chee-ild! Look up! Dry those tears. . . . It isn't bath-time for us all, yet. . . . That's better. And my fingers, too, to prevent rheumatism. Now lend me your handkerchief. This damned grease-paint!"

Quite unabashed, he wiped his own eyes. Then he flung the handkerchief into her lap, with a laugh. "What fools! aren't we? We always were. And—in strict confidence—I believe we always shall be!"

Leo smiled tremulously. "Is it us? Or is it the world? Val, the world is getting too realistic for you and me. It is so difficult—so *impossible* to readjust one's self."

"Damned difficult." He rose and threw out his arms

with unconscious passion. "One can never get free. Always shackles, shackles, shackles. . . . When I stood on those steps to-night, and looked down into the King's Court, I felt, just for an instant the rapture . . . the . . . the freedom . . . I *felt* 'Midir' . . . You understand."

The last words held no question. They were a mere statement. She smiled into his eager face.

"I understand. Of course."

"Of course."

She rose too and faced him. For one moment during his words, a glimpse of all that past hell and purgatory had been vouchsafed to the girl whose hand had partly caused them. She seized his arms. "Val," she cried, "Val! Ah! what have I done? What have I done? And you have said no word of blame. . . . Written no reproaches."

"For God's sake, Leo—what are you saying?" He drew back sharply, and turned away to the dressing-table.

She looked at the back of his bowed head, a world of tenderness mixed with the self-accusation in her eyes. His voice sounded muffled.

"A man may owe his life to another, and be able to express—gratitude. . . . But the woman to whom he owes his —his honor . . . Leo . . . You—you mean something to me now that you—never meant in the old days. . . ." Turning slowly, he met her look with one she had never seen before. Again the world slipped away. The long, long glance that passed between them comprised mutual thanks, mutual trust, tenderness, loving comprehension. It was as though they had faced the thing that once held menace; had cast it away behind them for ever; and in the temple of their friendship, had sanctified the empty spot. . . .

Then Leo drew closer her cloak.

"I will go now," she murmured. Just then she felt the impossibility of casual conversation.

"You will come to supper somewhere——"

She shook her head. "Not to-night. We—we will talk to-morrow."

"But I will take you back to the hotel. Just let me change."

"No, Val. No. I . . . I . . . Please let me go alone. . . . Come for me early to-morrow morning. . . . Oh, my dear. . . . You understand."

He turned to the door without another word of protest.

"I—I haven't even mentioned—oh, Val! 'Midir'! 'Midir'! It was——"

Val opened the door, and smiled. "I felt you there," he said simply.

"And I followed. . . I followed you home."

CHAPTER VII

LEO lay awake contrasting this reunion with the last at Basle. Then, sheer inconsequent happiness had been the keynote. To-night an unexpected note of poignant pain had frustrated all attempts at the old light harmony of intercourse. The moment of meeting for which she had longed had proved well-night unbearable by a subtle, mysterious element of tragedy permeating the joy. Yet, outwardly, nothing had changed. With the same free, almost childlike simplicity, they had met and kissed. The past had raised no barrier. None of the passion she had once encountered showed in Val's face or impregnated his actions. None of that which only Harry inspired had been evident in her own heart.

Leo was not given to self-analysis. She was vaguely conscious of their one-time careless, affectionate camaraderie having developed into a friendship containing a curious element—one that was subtly sacred. It had reached a plane that even her idealism had never embraced. Yet below this exaltation lay that other mysterious element of tragedy. . . .

She fell asleep at last, and did not awake until the chambermaid called her next morning. Ross had been left at Willerton. The spring sunshine streaming into the room banished all last night's pain. Recapturing some of the old instincts of bachelor freedom, she stretched her limbs luxuriously and flung her arms back across the pillows. Then she sprang out of bed, eager lights of anticipation in her

eyes, and, for the first time for many weeks, sang snatches of song in her bath.

Directly after breakfast Val appeared. He bounded across the hall to the lift and almost dragged her out.

"Quick!" he cried. "Don't ask questions. . . . Jump into this taxi. We shall just catch it."

"What?"

"The train."

Laughing weakly, she found herself hurled down the steps into the waiting car.

"Waterloo. Like hell!" Val cried graphically to the porter, and flung himself down on the seat. "Good egg! We shall do it."

"Where?" began Leo breathlessly.

"Nowhere. You don't want facts? I have a beautiful plan. We are eloping for the day. D'you mind?"

"No. I love it." She caught his little sidelong glance, and the warm familiarity of his presence whirled her back to the old rapturous freedom. "Love it!" she cried again. "Isn't it all—isn't it just—glorious?"

Val tossed his cap to the roof and caught it again. In homespun jacket and knickerbockers, his long limbs recalled vividly the wandering days in Switzerland. Leo flicked his knee. "Don't mention names. But tell me the beautiful plan for our elopement."

He leaned back and ticked off one finger after another. "We go by train to a—place. Then we bus to another—place. There we are disgorged upon gorse bushes.—Will they be in flower, d'you know?—We then wander along sandy paths. Or we sit on the gorse. Or we roll on heather—I suppose there's no chance of that flowering just for to-day? No? . . . Oh, well, there'll be larks and rabbits and things. . . . Or we float on the waters of a certain pond——"

"Sounds suspiciously like Surrey."

"Not really? Jove! What brain! What acumen! In yon knapsack I have a 'loaf of bread, a flask of wine, and thou.'"

"I'm not in the knapsack."

"Never mind. The last line says something about 'Paradise enow,' and that's the point."

"Yes," Leo remarked, with a sudden rush of feeling that subtly vibrated in the simple word.

For a moment some of the light faded from the man's face, and he gazed away through the window at the passing traffic.

"Yes . . ." he echoed rather absently. "Yes."

Then he turned back with a little laugh. "Whatever we do or leave undone, we must arrive at a certain place at a certain hour, where the bus will again remove us to another place. Then a train will eject us at Waterloo in time for 'Midir' to arrive at the psychological moment. It would be awkward if he didn't turn up. I wonder what would happen?"

"I suppose 'Etain' would stay with the King."

"I don't. I think she would find her own way back. She couldn't help it because it is—really—her home, you see. Well—where was I? . . .Oh, yes! After the opera, we'll have a *terrific* supper together. Then I'll divorce you, *pro tem.* To-morrow we'll have another shorter flutter."

"You're singing to-morrow night, too?"

"Yea, verily. After that I'm having a short holiday before a new contract begins. Here's the station"—he glanced at his watch—"three minutes. You scoot off for the tickets while I pay the driver. Take my purse."

"Idiot! You want money for paying him, don't you?"

"Oh! I believe so. Take this note——"

But Leo had sprung out and disappeared. Within a moment, however, she came running back.

"Val! You fathead! I don't know the name of the place."

"Oh! anywhere. . . . Here. . . . I'm coming." Throwing a note into the driver's hands he dashed off, forgetful of change, Leo in hot pursuit.

They fell into the last carriage just as the train moved off. It was a third, and very crowded.

"I don't care!" Leo assured him. "I wouldn't mind the luggage-van. I'm tired of first-class life!"

The majority of the other occupants were Tommies traveling to Aldershot. Within ten minutes Val had them all neck-deep in mutual war reminiscences. The carriage resounded with shouts of laughter. Their stories became so alarming that an elderly lady got out at the first stop, and another alighted at the next, after hearing Val glibly assure the men that Leo was not his wife—they had merely eloped. . . .

The heather did not burst into bloom under their feet; nor was the gorse yet burning with its early summer madness: the rolling commons were but sprinkled with gold-tipped dark bushes. Nevertheless rabbits scuttled, birds wheeled overhead, waterfowl splashed and shrieked, or floated languorously, over water reflecting the sky's blueness and ragged bunches of cloud. A fresh breeze rippled the tops of pine trees with the murmuring swish of the sea. Its song gave to the scene around something of the sense of Infinity which most inland scenery lacks.

Leo pulled off her hat and shook her hair free, with one of her gasps of ecstatic delight.

"Space!" she cried. "It's what I have craved, for months!"

"Why?" Deliberately Val chose to misunderstand. "Isn't there space at Willerton? It is country——"

"Oh, yes—it's country. There are woods and fields—

very pretty. But everywhere is cultivated or preserved. Possession is a passion there. Money, clothes, motor-cars, food, furniture—oh, I don't think anybody cares about anything beyond possessions—and their price. It's the sort of place where people close their windows and call fresh air a draught. You understand."

Again, as last night, the two words were a mere statement of fact between them. Val merely pressed the arm he held.

"People stack huge houses with baubles and call them 'home.' Keeping those baubles clean, and stuffing their menfolk's stomachs is 'woman's work.' You strain at shackles, Val. These people deliberately imprison themselves in—materialism, yet think they live! . . . I walk about the streets of Cuvingham and study the faces of the men and women. And I see nothing but flesh, with hard eyes that look old, staring out of it. They have not that 'upward look' one reads about. . . . The—the faces lack *soul*. . . . Val! Val! have these successful people really achieved success? It is—it all crushes others' souls, too. You were right—about being responsible for people. . . . Oh, I feel stifled!—stifled! D'you remember saying, 'Suppose the noose strangles you'?"

"And you replied"—he stemmed her passionate outburst—"you replied very confidently, 'I shan't let that happen.'"

She gave a bitter laugh. "I had not then realized that life held—impossibilities."

"Are you certain now, that it does? Quite positive?"

"Yes. At least"—she glanced up into his face—"don't you think there are? Shackles, Val——"

"One must make very sure. . . . Shackles are usually self-forged. . . . I certainly think you are up against one of the hardest problems, dear old thing—the adjustment of materialism with—all the rest."

She stood still, in the narrow woodland path, and looked away from him.

"You once told me that 'some people ought never to marry'," she said slowly. "I wonder sometimes if . . . I don't seem to be needed in Harry's real life. Wives are not, about Willerton—in the sense I mean."

He too stood still, watching intently her averted face. Neither spoke for several minutes. Then a fir-cone fell with a thud at their feet. Val picked it up abstractedly.

"Leo," he began at length, "you have—Love. . . . Haven't you?"

"Yes, Val," she replied quickly.

"I read that in your letters. . . ." He was breaking the little seed coverings on the cone, and examining the tiny, unexpected cavities hidden below each. "Well. . . . You haven't married materialism."

"Ah, but that is the—the tragedy. Harry expects me to do so. Unless I sink into the materialistic rut—marry it—Harry and I may lose each other in the gulf. . . . Oh, Val! I am terrified of that!"

Something of the irrevocable irony of this life's decrees caused him to look at her drooping head and clasped hands in wonder.

"Do you think you need be so afraid? Crusts get formed . . . like those on this cone. But they can be broken." He threw himself down beside her on the carpet of pine needles.

"But if there were not something below the crust—you could not love. You *couldn't*. Others might. But *you* . . . Isn't that proof?"

The girl's face suddenly flushed. She bent over the needles and raised a handful, allowing them to trickle through her fingers before she replied.

"Love is a—is a strange force, Val."

"Damned strange!" he agreed warmly. "But that's a most unoriginal remark."

"I once believed it—to be so different . . . chiefly—spiritual."

"You did, Leo," he murmured, with feeling. "And you have realized—your mistake?"

She nodded, bending lower over the fir-needles. He clasped his hands round his knees and watched her.

"That is one of our many readjustments," he said slowly. "To realize the dual and combine both sides. . . . Is—is that part of the gulf, Leo? Is that one of your difficulties?"

She nodded again. "And I don't know if—one side only—is worth keeping. Besides, is that side alone possible to keep—for ever?"

"No," his voice was sharply decisive. "Leo, my own marriage is proof. *That* side, as you call it, will not last—alone. It lands one in the gulf pretty quickly. If you possessed only that you also would be in by now—both of you—not merely on the brink. . . . Just consider that point instead of being terrified."

Bit by bit Val was piecing together the puzzle of her hasty marriage following so soon the night in the mountains. All that he read behind her words, fitting in with both the written and unwritten lines of her letters, was enabling him to draw near the completion of the pattern.

"I wonder," Leo observed, "if, in marriage, the two reals can ever be perfectly combined."

Val's heart, full of pent-up love and longing, answered in a passionate affirmative. But his emotions had been trained for long now in a hard school. He kept his eyes upon the parcels he was extracting from his old knapsack. "Just now and then perhaps. But rarely, I think. Because—because the call of the Infinite varies so much."

"So does the other—call."

"Yes. But not quite to the same extent. Variety in surface stones doesn't matter provided the same sure ground is underneath. While we live this earthly life, the—the more earthy side of love must necessarily predominate—probably overbalance us a little. Leo, you are positive now of the existence of that other real? That it is worth fighting for?"

She glanced at him in surprise. "Yes. Oh, yes. I used to doubt . . . to wonder. . . . But now, the more materialistic the world seems, the more sure I feel. Those—baubles—couldn't mean *all*. . . . I suppose they form the irritant you once spoke of?"

"Exactly. There must be some point in our surroundings; we can't be thrown up against each other for nothing. I used to be intolerant of realism, as it's called—materialism. But"—he dropped the lunch and hugged his knees—"but intolerance is what clogs the wheels of every little revolution in the one big cycle. . . . Isn't it? Isn't it? I sometimes think now, Leo, that everybody who enters the world passes under the shadow of 'Dalua,' so that . . . so that we can only get transitory glimpses—just reminders—of things beyond. The shadow does not pass over some people as much as others, and they get surer glimpses. . . According to their glimpses, so their aim here. After all, I wonder what is the real aim of most, if we could read their hearts?"

She looked at the remote, half-mystical light in his eyes. "Happiness, surely."

"Perfect happiness. The word holds a different meaning for each. When two or more try to find it together, they must be content with 'the least common multiple,' as arithmetic books say. Mustn't they? Find the 'common multiple' and pile it up high. Leo!" . . . He suddenly threw his arm across her lap and clasped both her hands. "Won't

you? . . . You may . . . Surely you will have a child—some day? Won't that help to—adjust things?"

She gave another of the bitter little laughs that sounded strange on her lips. "I don't know. I haven't felt any—longing for one. Harry says he wants a son to 'carry on the business.' It—it's all just—duty. . . . And I—I felt the noose strangling——"

"Oh, no, no. My dear! *No*. . . . To me a—mother—is the most beautiful connection between the two realities—bringing a soul from beyond and clothing it in its earthly form." . . .

Her quick look surprised a strangely reverent glow in his eyes. Of all subjects under the sun, few can be made to appear more degrading than birth. None, save death, so full of horror. And, again, none more beautiful. The girl's soul, stifled of late by the material aspect of this wonder, felt as if prison doors had opened. Here, with its passionate craving for beauty, it once more found beauty.

"Val . . . Val . . ." she muttered brokenly.

He folded his hands behind his head and lay back on the soft pine carpet.

"Every day a bird sings:
'It is the desire of the heart' "—

he murmured, half below his breath. "But that's far away—in the Land of Youth. . . . Not here. . . . Not here. . . ."

Again, as she had done last night, Leo sensed poignantly all the bitterness through which his own soul struggled. She looked down at the graceful lines of his figure, impulsively stretching out her hand and smoothing his thick hair. The wireless wave of understanding again flashed, in a long, long look between them, binding yet closer the tie that made these two so irrevocably one. . . . Leo set the seal of her lips upon it at last. As she bent down, he laid his hands

behind her head and, for a moment, pressed her cheek to his. Then he kissed her, and thrust her gently away. . . .

"Let's take our lunch out into the sunshine," he suggested, rising to his feet.

She helped him to collect the scattered parcels of food. As she did so, a swift remembrance of her picnic near here with Harry crossed her mind. . . . In silence she led the way out of the wood.

From the heather beyond the trees a lark, startled, rose with a flutter of wings and a ripple of ecstatic melody. Val caught Leo's arm, and stood still. Higher and higher the little brown body soared, showering all around with cascades of notes crystal—passionately free. . . .

Val impulsively exclaimed, "How limited we mortals are! Listen to that. . . . Listen to that." . . . All the artist quivered in his voice. "Where is he going? What is the secret he knows? . . . Ah! if we could reach that freedom. . . . So fettered . . . so damnably fettered. . . . And so weary of the fetters." . . .

Leo glanced up in some consternation. This outburst uncomfortably belied the confidence of his past remarks. As if from a tightly strung bow, the arrow of his heart's cry had shot unexpectedly forth, revealing the tense strain behind. Realizing the self-revelation, he flung down the knapsack. "Leo! what a helpless reed I am! I can't build my own bridges. How can I therefore help you? . . . Oh, lord! let's have some lunch. . . . Where are the cigarettes?"

She caught his hand. "Whatever happens, we are sure of each other. That'll help."

"Yes. Sure of each other." He looked her full in the eyes. And because he knew the old traitorous weakness to be still the chief enemy, alert below the strongest armour, he repeated the assurance: "Yes, whatever happens. *Quite* sure." . . .

High on one of those waves of exaltation which fling one up to meet a sky-line of hope renewed, firm resolve, deluding self-confidence, Leo entered the theater that night. Both the music and the drama had come home to her own soul with symbolic force. And never had Val sung more sublimely. His words of the night before recurred to her: "The freedom. . . . I *felt* 'Midir' . . ." His personality, seemed, she thought, uncannily incorporated with the character. "Transitory glimpses." . . . "Midir" himself was but a transitory glimpse of the soul's true home. He brought the light and the breath of beauty such as no mortal might behold and live. . . . Such freedom was his that he appeared even loath to step across the threshold of a palace built by human hand. . . . Leo, listening to his enraptured words, thought of the lark that morning—the lark soaring to freedom—and Val's impassioned cry. So incorporated had they become in her mind, that Val himself—not acting a part—might have been vanishing up toward the clouds, gone to the Land of Youth leaving his shackles forgotten. . . . "Transitory glimpses." . . . Leo wrapped her cloak round her, conscious of a bleak sense of desolation. . . .

During their "terrific supper" she alluded to this, with a laugh not wholly genuine. "It seemed as if you had gone . . . you yourself, not 'Midir.' I felt——" A little shudder completed the sentence.

"I wish I had."

"Oh, no, no! *No*, Val."

The frightened appeal in her eyes made him laugh the matter away.

"Hoots! I'm not fey. . . . Let us drink the wine of the gods to our perfect day, with fervent prayers for another. That's not greedy. It's the sincerest form of thanks."

"Do you remember your toast in Switzerland—'To the cracking of the nut'?"

He glanced at her rather oddly. "I fancy I—indirectly—helped that violent crack. . . . Well!" he raised his glass. "'To the bridging of the gulf!' I wish—I wish I could help again. . . ."

They had returned to her hotel, and were seated in the lounge over a final cigarette when Leo's hand struck against a budget of papers and envelopes partly protruding from his overcoat pocket. She pulled them farther out.

"What are these stuffy-looking things?"

"Oh, the post. I'm dashed!" With a laugh, he dragged forth the bundle. "No time to read them at my rooms, so took them along. Hello! Now how the devil did *that* get among them? I'd completely forgotten about *that*."

"What is—*that?*" She glanced at the long envelope he was fingering, and wrinkled up her nose. "Looks legalish."

"I believe it is. A writ or something."

"A *writ?* Oh, Val, do read it. Is it for an unpaid bill?"

"Quite possibly." Frowning in whimsical bewilderment he drew out some folded sheets of paper. "A fellow brought it to the theater just when I was going on the stage, I remember now. He said he'd been chasing me all day, and I told him to chase on to the devil. Then—what the—*what*——"

He broke off, leaning suddenly forward and clutching the sheet spasmodically. Leo's attention was claimed at that moment by the waiter's approach with their drinks. When the man had gone she turned from the tray to the figure beside her on the couch, and the light words she was about to speak died unuttered on her lips. For he was still leaning forward, clutching the sheets of paper, devouring the words as if they were some noisome poison, and his face looked unusually pale, strangely tense.

"What is it, Val?"

He turned slowly. His breath came in little gasps. In

his eyes was the bewildered expression of a child seized in the midst of play and roughly chastised.

"Val! what is it?" she cried again, catching his arm.

"It's . . . it's . . ." He was gazing at her, and seemed scarcely to comprehend what his lips tried jerkily to formulate. "It's . . . my wife . . . a . . . a petition for . . . divorce."

"*Divorce!*" She grasped the papers he allowed to slip from his fingers. "But . . but how? . . . What grounds? What's this—citation?"

"Our time in Switzerland. . . . You and me. . . . Leo, . . . you . . . you and me." . . .

CHAPTER VIII

"IT will mean freedom. . . . Your freedom."

They were the first coherent words she uttered. It was the first coherent thought her mind grasped, after the dazed bewilderment had passed.

"Freedom. . . ." A voice whose harshness caused it to sound like that of a stranger echoed her words.

Leo glanced round the lounge. A few yards away, on her left, the same bald-headed man sat talking to a stout woman at a small table. The same merry quartet of boys and girls were discussing a revue in high-pitched voices, from a nook on her right. The same couple—obviously newly wed—were talking together in low voices in her direct line of vision. She had seen these people years ago it seemed, and they had remained in exactly the same attitude while she lived a lifetime. . . . Nobody appeared to notice anything extraordinary about Val or herself. This struck her as rather funny. Another thing was funny. Both their glasses were empty. . . . But she remembered the waiter bringing them in full. She looked at Val. He sat perfectly motionless, staring at the floor. She touched his arm.

"There is a little writing-room just here—generally empty. We can talk. . . . Come, Val."

Movement more effectually removed the clouds of shock from their brains. And, with the click of the latch closing the writing-room door, another coherent thought struck with fiery hand the first one away.

"Harry!"

The cry burst from her lips. This time it was she who stared unseeingly before her, eyes dilated.

"Harry!" her lips muttered again. . . "What can I do. . . . He will never understand. . . . Never believe."

Val was at her side in a moment, kneeling on the floor, his arm around her. "He will understand . . . he shall understand. Leo, you don't suppose I would accept freedom at—at such a cost? You don't think—*that* of me?"

"Why? what would you do?"

"Fight the thing tooth and nail—if there's no other way of quashing it. Why should it affect his belief? He understands all about our—our friendship."

"Ah, Val!" She hid her eyes with her hand. "He does *not*—that's the point——"

"*Not!*" Val started to his feet. By no word or sign had Leo ever shown him this trouble that sat so heavily on her heart.

"He knew nothing about it until Mrs. Blake—'Sarah'—came to Willerton and started a scandal."

"Mrs. Blake! Scandal . . . I . . . Good God, Leo! What have you been hiding? What have you been—been suffering, all alone?" He threw himself down again beside her. "Tell me. . . . Tell me at once. . . . Everything." . . .

And with hands clasped in his, she recounted the events of the past weeks. "I couldn't tell you before," she faltered at the end. "It—it seemed to taint. . . . It was mud, and everything was so beautiful. . . . But now . . . Val! Val!"—she freed her hands and caught his shoulders—"they will drag you down now into the mud. You . . . you. . . . Oh! I can't bear it. . . . Isn't there a way out? Show it to me again—the citation." . . .

But with devilish ingenuity one skein after another had been woven together into a pattern that could never be

unraveled without leaving broken, mud-stained strands. From the early bath at the Basle hotel—when two women had witnessed Val's departure from the bathroom after having been "locked in" for a considerable time—to the hotel at Lake Thun, where Val, at midnight, had been seen to enter Leo's bedroom—to the hotel on the Scheidegg Pass, nothing that could be misconstrued was omitted. At the Scheidegg hotel only the Englishman's name had been entered in the visitors' book, against which was the number of a double-bedded room. A double-bedded room had been ordered by telephone. Afterward the Englishman had insisted upon another being prepared. This other communicated with the first, and had not been used after all. Certainly the pair had been considered man and wife. . . .

This resurrection of what both had buried deeply out of sight, instead of severing them, now drew them closer together. Only one episode, both knew, could have colored these revolting insinuations with any vestige of truth, and that episode remained unknown. But it made no difference. Given a rake, filth can be churned from the clearest pool. They found themselves impotent, with their inconsequence, their rash idealism, to prove the truth to a world of facts. . . .

He threw his arms around her. "Leo, there need be no barriers between us, need there, now? You know you have my love, don't you? It has done you more harm than good. . . . But perhaps, some day. We are sure of each other, as we said this morning. . . . I will make your husband believe. I will go to him——"

"No! not for the world!" She drew back in fear. "You don't understand Harry, as I do."

"Do you?"

She passed the question over. "*I* must talk to him first. When he returns from Paris, he may feel differently. I may be able to make him listen without mistrust."

"I could do that better than you, Leo. Don't you see? I must meet him, dear. This is my——"

"Val! you shan't! He—he is prejudiced against you and your profession. . . . You shall not see him before I do. . . . Promise me—promise me you will not try? Afterward. I will send for you afterward."

"When does he return?"

"I don't know. . . ." She rose from her chair and walked to the table. Without turning round she announced her startling resolve. "When Harry does understand, I want you not to fight this petition, Val."

"*Not*——" His breath failed him.

"It is your one chance . . . perhaps your only chance—to win freedom. I want you to take it. In the eyes of the world we shall be—stained—in any case. But what do they matter? You and I—and Harry—will know the truth." She turned and stretched out her hands. "You will have freedom then and honor too—where honor matters."

He caught her hands and drew them up to his lips. Then he released them, and smiled. "Belovedest friend!" he whispered. "You would sacrifice all your honor—in the eyes of the world—to gain my freedom? Leo! Leo! Leo! . . . I will never accept that."

But she caught his arms as he turned away. "Ah, why not? If—if you win, what will you have in your life to make it free? You will be still shackled."

"Those shackles are easier to bear than the ones you offer me!" He passed his hand through his gleaming hair, and smiled. "I have my music. That has been wife, love, child, friend—life itself—in the past. It will be so still. . . . This has to be a fight for you and—your Harry. Besides, he will not agree to such a thing. What man would? And the facts are so damned black that probably in any case . . . Now, sit down and put those wild ideas

out of your head. We must discuss these points calmly; go through every detail; wallow in the muck. . . . That bathroom door——"

"Banged to. Don't you remember? We had a scuffle. Oh, Val . . . it was all such—such innocent nonsense! I . . . you . . ." She glanced at the face bent over the paper. In its troubled bewilderment, the air of ethereality appeared subtly enhanced. His personal beauty had never struck her so forcibly before. The soul that ever shone in his deep eyes looked out now mutely, crying for release, yet ruthlessly fettered.

"How long did we—did we scuffle? Can you remember?"

The pitiful simplicity of the question broke something in the girl's self-control. She caught his arm and buried her face in his coat-sleeve.

"I can't bear it. . . . Not *you* . . . *you!* . . . I can't bear it." . . .

The next day Leo returned to Willerton at Val's insistence. His old inconsequence had merged into a tenderness that was both pathetic and attractive. This love of his, which once had assumed menacing forms, became an increasingly precious possession, to be held closely, reverently. She had wished to remain within its warmth; to stay in London until Harry returned. But Val's air of terrific responsibility overbore argument.

"Rash. Much too rash! I have to guard your every step now, or . . . We mustn't risk anything more. Get under your husband's roof, for heaven's sake! I dare scarcely speak above a whisper. . . ."

Nevertheless, he dared to see her off, and to lean into the carriage, talking, until the train started. When the clasp of his hands had faded, and the last glimpse of his

tall figure vanished, the dreary sensation of returning to an alien land crept over Leo. From London with its pulsating life to a provincialism savors usually of a fall from a roundabout to a plain bare road. After revolving at the center of life one is left crawling drowsily. When music and love are on the roundabout, and only hard stones greet one upon the road, the contrast is the more dreary. The first stone Leo encountered took the form of Arnie at Cuvingham Station. He stared at her for a moment before remembering just to jog his hat; then he turned away to the bookstall. Next moment, Mrs. Bonne emerged from her limousine. She also stared at Leo before remembering just to jog her lips; then she turned away to give an order to her chauffeur.

The red glint was very evident in Leo's eyes as she entered the car. Wiggins, used to the friendliest acknowledgments, wondered a little at her manner. He waited respectfully at the door.

"Home," she said briefly. And a certain incongruity in the word caused a bitter smile to curl her lips.

Among the letters awaiting her lay one from Harry, which she seized eagerly. But with the instinct of a child leaving the plums till last, she scanned her other letters first, over a lonely tea. One was from Susie. It was jerky, partly apologetic, partly self-consciously dignified. Sam had decided upon the impossibility of keeping the pram, unless Leo would allow him to buy it on a kind of instalment system? Sam had also decided to dismiss Kitty Marten. They could not afford her themselves, and now of course . . . But Susie's mother had intervened and would pay the girl's wages. . . . Susie was "very much grieved" over the past occurrence, and concluded "Yours sincerely." . . .

Leo tore the letter into shreds. Behind Susie's neat

writing and fluttering words showed the plump finger of the Reverend Sam. And this subjugation of her own individuality even to the estrangement of her friends infuriated Leo. What wonder that, about here, real friendship remained a thing unknown? What wonder that marriage degenerated into a hole-and-corner existence in which spirit and intellect played no part? . . .

She turned to her husband's letter and opened the envelope. What mixed feelings, what agitation of mind, lay behind the carefully worded sentences, she could not know. Like himself, his written communications erred too much upon the side of reserve. He expected to return sooner than he had anticipated. What were Leo's plans for London? Why had she not sent her address? Was she not going, after all? . . .

The letter fell upon her lap. In the whirl of the past few days, her promise to Harry had slipped entirely from her mind. But he would understand this, when she told him the cause. . . . At least . . . Would he understand? . . .

This word, in connection with Harry, was becoming an obsession. It was characteristic of Leo that no idea of prevarication ever entered her mind. To avoid misconceptions many married women might have sought to cover widening gulfs with sham support of colored reeds. Leo searched for true-grained oak, "Peace at any price"—founded on a smooth soil of hypocrisy—did not, to her, constitute marriage. The word stood for unity—perfect unity of spirit as well as of body. And such unity existed only upon the rugged soil of truth.

She reread Harry's polite inquiries concerning herself, his brief account of his own doings; and she sat for long gazing at the firm clear calligraphy. A thought, dropped she knew not when—a seed begotten of these past weeks of strain—had shot up long tendrils of fresh ideas, that

The whir of the car caused her heart to beat wildly as she descended the stairs. She gripped the banister and stood there, half hidden by a bend, powerless to go down. She heard the front door open and close; then Harry's voice speaking to Pomfrey. He crossed the hall and came into view, and the sight of his well-known figure caused all fear of the future to merge into a rush of present longing. As there had been a familiarity of spirit in the renewed sight of Val, so now another familiarity drew Leo down the stairs, with outstretched hands, seeking the sanctuary of Harry's arms. . . . A bird again, flying by instinct to its rightful nest. . . .

He turned round at her quick step, and she halted so suddenly that she nearly overbalanced; for Harry made no attempt to meet her. He offered no welcome. His eyes merely flashed one cold penetrating glance that seemed to freeze her up from head to foot.

Pomfrey's presence saved the situation. Leo came forward, and found her voice in the refuge of a commonplace.

"Have you had a—pleasant journey, Harry?"

"Quite, thanks."

"Dinner is waiting. It was put back."

"I had my dinner on the train." He gave her another peculiarly searching glance. "Will you have yours, and then come to the study? We—can talk there."

Conscious of a clammy sense of foreboding, she fingered her throat convulsively. What had happened to cause this frigid home-coming? Why did Harry look at her like this? Had he heard, already? Surely Val—— With faltering steps and bewildered brain she turned away to the dining-room. And the longing on the stairs, which might have decided the balance of the see-saw, faded into fear. . . .

CHAPTER IX

THE April evening was chilly, and a fire had been lighted in Harry's study. When Leo entered, a vivid memory of the last scene enacted herein rose to daunt her upon the threshold. The room had assimilated the essence of that scene as, more tangibly, it assimilated the aroma of cigars or cigarettes.

Harry was standing on the hearth-rug, looking down abstractedly at the burning coals. He made no movement beyond a little jerk of the hand to acknowledge her presence. She shut the door slowly, and slowly moved forward to the writing-table. For a moment she looked irresolutely at his uncompromising back. Then, placing a suède hand-bag on the table, she walked deliberately across the room and laid her hand in the crook of his arm.

"Well, Harry? I . . . I am so glad you are back."

Her remark passed unnoticed; but it served to break the ice in which he had encased himself. He looked down straight into her eyes.

"Leo"—his voice sounded harsh from abruptness—"why didn't you tell me you were in London?"

A dull flush mounted to her face—a flush of surprise, embarrassment, mixed with fear. Before she found a reply he continued jerkily: "Milne met me in town to-day. We came back together. He said he traveled up with you a week ago."

"Yes. He did. Harry"—her fingers clung to his unresponsive arm—"I meant to write—as I promised. . . . In-

deed I did. . . . But—so much has happened. . . . I forgot. I—I am going to tell you why."

"Perhaps that is unnecessary?" Shaking off her hand he picked up an illustrated paper and held it toward her. "Probably this will save your explanations?"

A large photograph of Valyran caused the flush to fade from her cheeks, leaving them very pale. A brief account of his reappearance last week in London revealed, in a flash, the deductions of Harry's mind. The lack of all greeting on his return was explained. He was a man incapable of subterfuge.

"Yes," she said again, "I am going to explain everything, Harry."

"Again, is it necessary?" The bitterness in his tone made her shrink under his scrutiny. "I understand, without excuses. Several things that were not quite clear, when I went away, are clear to me now. His return and my absence coincided remarkably well——"

"Harry! Harry!" She threw down the paper and faced him. "You do *not* understand! You are deliberately deceiving yourself, and—and trying to hurt me."

"Hurt?" He swung round, more passion in his face and voice than she had ever known. "My God, Leo! Do you suppose I wish to think these things? But—by heaven! could any man help—suspicion? Let us have the truth, and nothing else. You knew when I left, you were going to meet him in London?"

"Yes."

"Then—*why did you refuse to give your address?*"

All the blood seemed to drain away from her face at the question he thus flung out, and the insinuation it conveyed. Her trembling hands caught the mantel-shelf.

"No . . . no. . . . How dare you? Oh, how dare you . . . think those things? . . . I did not know my address. That is

the truth. I—I swear it, Harry. I had made no plans. I had only that morning heard he . . . he was going to sing last week." . . . Some of her old hot temper gave her courage to meet the challenge in his eyes. She threw out an impetuous hand. "Go . . . I will give you the address now . . . go . . . make inquiries. Satisfy your—your—horrible mind——" But, with stunning suddenness, memory of all yet to be confessed surged up. A terrible fear of the consequences, the full force of which only her inmost heart guessed, paralyzed her. Her head fell forward on the arms she flung across the mantel-shelf. "Ah!" she gasped, half-sobbing. "What can I do? What can I do?"

Harry was a little moved. During his absence his mind had been very full of Leo. Among the scenes of their first married days, scenes pervaded with the fragrance of trust and tenderness, the new thoughts struggling to birth in his mind had somewhat subdued the opposing force of specters. He thought he had killed many of the insects of jealousy and mistrust. Returning, therefore, with intentions of a readjustment of some sort, the blow of this new suspicion had come with double-barreled violence. The polished Milne and the illustrated paper combined in one railway carriage to turn the trend of his intentions. Leo's "foolery," as he considered it, was to be brought to a climax—one way or another.

This obvious sincerity proved, as usual, disconcerting. To look into her eyes and doubt the truth of her words seemed too violent a contradiction.

"Yet," muttered the insects, "yet——" At her sudden distress, however, suspicion slunk away for the moment. Harry laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Leo, I want to trust your word. I would give my life to say I do. But you must, in fairness, admit——"

"You *must* trust it, Harry!" She raised her head, a kind

of anguish in her wet eyes that startled him. "You *must!*" she repeated. "You must have—faith in it—and in me—to the utmost limit, through—through what I have to tell you."

He watched her quivering face from under puzzled, downdrawn brows. "To tell me? What do you mean?"

She stumbled forward, caught his arm, and clung to it, burying her face in his coat-sleeve.

"Ah, Harry! Harry!" she half-sobbed, "if you don't . . . trust . . . I—I don't know what may happen—I'm afraid—terribly afraid——"

He looked down at her tumbled hair with new unknown fears adding to the tumult of his own mind. Unknowingly he missed the full import of this moment, which was one of those unexpected, hidden turnstiles that have such terrific bearing on the path of life. Had he arrived fresh from his musings in Paris, with no interruption to arouse in full force his suspicions; had he then been greeted like this, all his latent love and protection might have risen to meet her appeal. By one of those cruel little tricks of fate, the very opposite had been the case. Jealousy, anger, mistrust were rioting in confusion.

"Of what?" he demanded sharply.

She felt his arm grow rigid in her clasp, and too late she realized the rash futility of breaking her news to-night. To try to draw back now was foolish, but she made a feeble attempt.

"I'll—let it wait till to-morrow," she muttered, loosing him. "We are both—too much upset now."

"Oh, no, no. . . ." He, this time, caught her by the arm, and she winced at the force of his grip. "I must know—now. What is it?"

She faced him passionately. "Harry! Will you try to understand? Not let yourself be—prejudiced? Not—not—be too—hard?"

"For God's sake tell me," he cried, his grasp tightening. Save to increase his fear, the pleading in her face and voice left him unmoved.

But to begin, Leo found, was impossible. At this critical moment, when she needed faith and encouragement, his vise-like grip bruised her flesh, the steely glint in his eyes piercing her very skin. She made three ineffectual, incoherent attempts to break the news gently. And at last, goaded by an impatient shake of her arm, a voice she scarcely recognized for her own blurted out the bald fact.

"Val's wife is seeking a divorce on—on the strength of our visit to Switzerland last year."

Harry dropped her arm as if it were a snake. His breath hissed back between his teeth; but the cold eyes never ceased their merciless penetration.

Leo became vaguely conscious of getting, in some strange way, outside herself; of beginning to revolve round and round that one central gray light that burned where it touched. She heard her body's even, dull voice continue:

"I have received my notice of—of the citation."

From far away, his voice—also strange, deadly, subtly terrifying—reached her:

"Where is it?"

"First let me explain. I want you to know——"

"Give me that notice."

"No, no. . . . I must tell you first. . . . Oh, let me explain."

The gray fire ceased to be the center of the weird revolutions outside herself. It moved, burned brighter, came nearer. . . . A little cry burst from her lips at the fierce clasp of his hands upon her shoulders and the faint sharp noise of chiffon tearing. . . . .

"What are you trying to hide? What have . . . what have"—his voice shook with a kind of concentrated rage—

"you been concealing all the time? . . . To—to shield your—lover."

With another cry she threw up her hands to ward him off, terrified at the deadly menace in his eyes, conscious of his clutching fingers moving up over her bare neck, toward her throat. . . .

Whether for a moment she actually lost consciousness she never knew. But she became suddenly aware of lying huddled, as if flung there, in his big armchair. He was leaning forward, his elbows propped on the mantel-shelf, the knuckles of his clenched hands white and tense against the dark brown of his hair.

For the second time in her life Leo felt herself in contact with the bedrock of the elemental hidden behind a man's reserve.

The little clock on the writing-table ticked with unnaturally loud insistence. A bit of burned coal fell into the fender with a metallic thud. All other sound in the world had surely ceased. . . . At tense moments one's overwrought nerves are first aware of small things. The torn blue chiffon dangling from her shoulder first caught the girl's eye. She took it between her fingers, wondering if there were any pins in the room. . . . Then, trying to rise from the low chair, she realized the deadly weakness of her limbs. She sank back, looking at her shaking hands in detached wonder. Why were her limbs shaking thus, when her mind felt all at once so extraordinarily calm? She glanced at Harry's bowed back. All fear seemed subdued by this unnatural calm. Her voice now was perfectly even—coldly abrupt as his own.

"Will you listen to me?"

The knuckles unclenched themselves, and his hands met together over his head. She felt a mild wonder at the muffled hoarseness of his voice.

"I am waiting to hear."

"In my bag on the table you will find the notice. You can read for yourself all the facts—as they are made to appear. My efforts to explain the truth are apparently useless. You . . . you always liked—*facts.*"

For a moment he remained motionless. Slowly moving at last, with his back still toward her, he picked up the little suède bag. Taking out the folded sheet of paper, he held it between undecided fingers as if hesitating to read some doom. . . . At last, with abrupt decision, he opened it and walked yet farther away, toward the window. This action contrasted so vividly with Val's clinging, protective warmth, that she realized the contrast bitterly, almost contemptuously.

For several minutes the clock's ticking was, again, the only sound to be heard.

At last he turned back, and the strangeness of his face startled her. Every feature was set in a rigidity that resembled some waxen mold. She seemed to be looking into the eyes of an acquaintance whom she barely knew.

"Well?" He shot the word out, with the curtness of a rifle crack. "What is—your version—of these—charges? What can you deny?"

"I can deny the whole charge—what it insinuates. These *facts* are but distortions."

He glanced again at the paper in his hand. "I must hear your—version—of each episode. This . . . this bathroom—"

"That is mostly a lie! The door was never locked. Val——"

"'Val'?"

"Yes: *Val.*" Conscious of the curl of his lip, she narrated shortly the episode of the morning bath at Basle. To one immersed in the strict prudery of middle-class morals it sounded preposterous. He could not conceive of any man going to a woman's bathroom to feel if the water were hot,

far less of his sitting on the bath to smoke a cigarette while she began to disrobe. It was "cheap" . . . horrible. . . . Again, he could not understand the freedom on Lake Thun. To saunter in and out of a girl's bedroom at, apparently, any hour of the day or night was unknown to his code. Even during his marriage he had been delicate over these familiarities. Probably this delicacy had helped to win through Leo's fastidiousness and to bind her to him. Now it was to prove a sharp sword of division. But the whole fact of a holiday such as this was incomprehensible to Harry. He could only struggle darkly from episode to episode. The strain was becoming too great for Leo. She felt conscious of her false calm deserting her bit by bit. And beyond yawned a precipice which drew nearer and nearer. . . .

When he reached the final charge and, with the ruthlessness of a cross-examining counsel, probed deeper and deeper into that old wound, her face grew deathly in its whiteness.

"I know nothing about the book," she declared impatiently. "I arrived there ill . . . hurt. And then I forgot to sign——"

"Why?"

A protesting hand alone answered the question. "Everything seemed so—unreal, that night . . . so hurried. . . . Val carried me straight to my room. Naturally, he stayed with me."

"Naturally?"

"Of course. Oh, Harry, Harry . . . . if you knew Val you would understand."

"I don't want prevarication now, Leo. Remember, I already know a great deal about that—night. I want the bald truth, please. Did . . . did this man make love to you then? Is that what you have been hiding? . . . Ah!"

Her face had sunk into her hands. "Consider the strain

we had both endured." . . . Harry could barely catch the trembling words muffled by her fingers. "I . . . I was—thoughtless. He . . . he was overwrought——"

Harry rapped the table with his knuckles. "Will you please give a straight answer to a straight question? Did he or did he not?"

After a long vibrant pause, he caught the halting whisper: "He . . . did." . . .

Harry walked to his writing-table and sank into the chair. "I suppose that is all," he remarked dully.

"All?" She uncovered her face and glanced across at him quickly. "What do you mean? We . . . he—he realized. . . . He went away to—his room——"

"But never used it? Never slept in—in his own—— Ah! My God!" He sprang to his feet. "Do you suppose any court of law——"

"Perhaps not. But you are not a court of law, Harry. *You* are my—husband."

He thrust out a silencing hand. "You have already admitted you love the man."

"Not in that way. . . . Oh, I have told you——"

"He . . . In this last charge he was seen—kissing you, in your room."

"That kiss was not when . . . it was no proof of—the kind of love you think——"

"But you allowed it?"

"Of course. I have often kissed Val——"

"Good lord!" In his restless pacing he halted near her chair and looked down upon her incredulously. "Your ideas of honor are—incomprehensible!"

With agitated, spasmodic movements utterly unlike his usual self-possession, he walked away again, to and fro, out of her line of sight, striking his free hand with the paper still clutched in the other.

A peculiar numbness was stealing over Leo. She became conscious again of unreality: of standing outside herself. Her mind felt blank. . . . It was the gulf again, she told herself half-consciously; the gulf between his point of view and hers. That gulf which somebody had said "can never be bridged." . . . Susie had said so. Susie believed in subjugation, not in bridge-building. . . . Couldn't love find a way unknown to the engineers of reason? If love existed.

"Harry," she cried imploringly, leaning over the arm of her chair, "can't *you* . . . won't *you* . . . when all appears black . . . yet have faith?"

He stood still, regarding her critically for several seconds as if she were a specimen of some strange being.

"Words are empty things between you and me, Leo. I might make professions of—of faith. But when every bulwark has been swept away like this, faith does not come easily."

"I think it is a test of . . . love." Her voice sank low. He continued his critical scrutiny for a time that seemed an eternity. At last he abruptly asked the question she least expected:

"What made you marry—*me?*"

Unprepared for this fresh challenge, she sat back in the chair and looked up at him blankly.

"Fear? . . . A refuge? . . . Or—a safeguard for yourself?"

"Ah!"

"I have been piecing things together," he continued mercilessly, watching her. "You were afraid. You had been deceived. . . . Yet, now you still care sufficiently to join the man in London." He waved away her attempted protest. "Are you mad, Leo? Or . . . do you want your freedom?"

"Freedom? *My*——" She looked dazed. "What do

you mean? Not . . . not that *you* will—can——" A shuddering feeling of sickness intensified the new horror creeping into her life.

"All this"—he tapped the copy in his hand—"happened before our marriage. But anything that happens after that. . . . I am only warning you, Leo. If you persist in meeting——"

A half-hysterical laugh cut across his words. Gathering all her ebbing strength she rose and faced him fearlessly.

"You would cast me off? . . . *You?* . . . After all—we have been to each other? . . . Is that your 'love'? To let go just when . . . when your help is needed? Do you realize that—Val—the friend you would slander . . . Val craves his freedom, and yet he . . . he means to risk losing this chance—for *my* sake—for *your* sake. . . . *Yours*. . . . Oh! it's not worth his sacrifice. . . . Not worth it. . . . Not worth it. . . ."

Leaning heavily against his table, she pressed both hands to her throbbing head, her breast heaving spasmodically. Harry watched her in frowning bewilderment. Accustomed to dealing with plain hard facts all his life, faith to him meant concrete proof through eye, brain, hand, and then result. That sublime clairvoyance of soul which would stake all on another soul it loved, though hidden under the blackest smoke, had not found a place among the text-books of his self-education. Such knowledge—or, rather, revelation—needs another teacher, without text-books. Harry might in time reason himself into such faith; but every rash word of Leo's helped to thwart his reasoning. If, in blind obedience to his warning, she had offered to renounce Val, the renunciation would have been proof of her love for himself. So, at this moment, he viewed the matter. But she did exactly the opposite. And this infuriated Harry. It brought to him a very different concrete proof. . . .

He walked slowly across to where she stood against the table. "It does not seem to occur to you that I have any feeling in this matter. You are treating it entirely from your point of view and his. Yet you expect 'love'—'faith.' . . . Be reasonable, Leo. I have warned you. . . . And I warned you, before, that there are some things no man can stand. Whatever happens, I will never . . . *never*—consent to a divided allegiance. You understand?"

His cold level tones cut across her heart like the lash of a whip. In the words she read the alternative he offered. The decision on the see-saw was being forced, ruthlessly, upon her. . . . She leaned more heavily upon the table, wondering why his figure became suddenly so indistinct. She felt herself stretching out groping hands toward it. . . . Her voice sounded very queer and remote.

"Women—are—expected to hold—fast—through anything—— Harry I—I feel so ill—where are you——"

He stepped quickly forward and caught her as she lurched heavily toward him.

CHAPTER X

THE strain relaxed that night with the effect of a highly pressed spring when the pressure is suddenly removed. Prostrate, utterly exhausted, Leo spent the next day in bed. She saw nobody except Ross and little Mink. The love of a dog, she thought miserably, was truer, purer, than that of a husband. She hugged the little body close. And a queer thought dropped into Leo's tired mind. If this first present of Harry's were a different gift, a more wonderful gift? If this small warm body had been another? A little child . . . Harry's child . . . the soul brought from beyond and clothed by Harry and herself in its mortal form. . . .

With face buried in her pillow she tried to crush these new strange longings that the thought conjured up. Val's ideal had become unexpectedly united with Harry, instead of remaining on a separate side of the gulf. But she scarcely realized the full import of this.

Harry had failed . . . Harry had failed. . . . All day the words dinned in her heart. With the fault common to those whose actions spring from emotional impulse she did not give reason its due. To love meant, with her, to act—generously, freely—regardless of costs. Anything else travestied the word. And, aware of her old shrinking, it appeared incredible that the one man who had conquered her fastidiousness could seriously doubt her integrity.

He was away all day and rang up to say he could not return for dinner. Leo was glad. Late in the evening she heard him in his room; but he did not try the handle of

the communicating door. It was long, now, since that door had been opened. . . .

No "divided allegiance." . . . Through another long night of feverish wakefulness those words danced in the darkness, firework lettering whose import was unmistakable. No unity. An alternative. An alternative to be rigidly adhered to. A decision upon one plank of the see-saw which would for ever swing the other into the limbo of the past.

Again duty forced. . . . But love entered. . . .

Again, with the early chirping of birds outside her window, stronger tendrils shot up from the insidious plant that had entangled her mind since her return to Willerton.

If Harry's love had turned to cold reason in which faith proved impossible, Val's sacrifice must be stopped at any price. . . . And the price? . . . Ever more enticingly the warmth of his love beckoned. . . . He needed her . . the invisible hands of her spirit stretched toward him. Could she renounce this spiritual oneness? Could she tread evermore the path that led through the bleak land of Duty, with no trusting hand to hold her own? . . . And if not? . . .

Shuddering, she drew up the bedclothes to hide the mockery of the early sunshine. . . .

All day these tendrils clutched her with increasing violence. Velvety though they appear, their soft sheaths cover claws which, once they get hold, cling closer . . . closer. . . .

At dinner Harry met her with a kind of distant courtesy much worse than anger. She had the uncomfortable sense that, sure of his own right standpoint, he was making every effort to allow her to reach it. With that miserable farce of "behaving as if nothing had happened," he made heroic attempts at conversation—attempts which, to her, seemed too ridiculous to encourage, save when the servants were in the room. But she lingered over her dessert, half-hoping

for, half-dreading, some allusion to that which pressed upon her heart. He made no reference to the subject, however; and she dared not. At the door he wished her a polite good night, and turned toward his study with a murmur of letters. . . .

Leo sat alone with Mink in the little sitting-room in which no discord had been allowed to enter. It was the outward symbol of the invisible home where Val and the things of beauty were permanent guests. They permeated each crevice from bookshelves to piano. And now they welcomed her with warm faithful hands . . . drew her, unresisting, as "Midir" had at last drawn "Etain." . . .

Again duty forced, but love enticed. . . . And in this sanctuary the enticement was surer; assumed the nature of a fact. . . . The decisive step forward, taken at the theater, could not be retraced. . . .

But when she left the room and went up-stairs to bed, the very certainty of that subconscious fact caused her to sway, like a pendulum, back to the side of uncertainty. And this uncertainty caused the knowledge of the past certainty to sweep her away on a tide of fear. She felt terrified, all at once, of herself. Terrified of the step growing thus gradually clear before her. Terrified of the renunciation it might mean, would mean. . . . Yet—cold barren duty with the barrier of mistrust always in the background! That, surely, would not be difficult to renounce? . . . Harry would talk of "rights"—and without love. . . . She shivered, tossing to and fro upon her bed. Switching on the light she looked around at the lavishly beautiful fittings and costly furniture. A bejeweled shell with only a stone in its emptiness. . . . Her eyes traveled to that communicating door. And another different flood of memory surged over her. Nights of love and tenderness unspeakable. . . . With sudden passionate fear and longing she sprang out of bed,

seized the handle, and flung the door open. Nothing but darkness greeted her. She pressed the switch with trembling fingers, and flooded the room with light. Nothing but emptiness. Harry had not come to bed. . . .

Leo leaned back against the wall, flinging a bare arm across her eyes. Like one drowning in a swirling flood, feeling herself drifting away, she had struggled to recapture the only sure raft . . . and it was missing. Conscious again of the engulfing, threatening waves, she struggled vainly in search of the raft. Without pausing even to throw a wrap over her nightgown, she opened her own door and fled down-stairs. Her bare feet sank noiselessly in the thick carpets.

A light shone beneath the study door. Drawing hard sobbing breaths, Leo seized the handle and burst into the room.

Harry sat listlessly in his armchair. No books or paper lay in his hands, He had no pipe or cigarette between his lips. He was doing absolutely nothing. At her unexpected appearance he sprang up in amazement, with a muttered ejaculation of her name.

The same impetus that had brought her here carried her across the room without pause for reflection. Stark fear haunted her white face, widened her eyes, trembled in the hands that clutched both his arms. For a few moments she could only hold him as if she would never loose his sleeves again, and gasp his name sobbingly. He was too astounded to move. And at last she shook the arms she held.

"Oh! . . . Are you made of stone? . . . Of stone? . . . Harry, I can't bear it. . . . I can't bear it." . . . A wild outburst of tears drowned her words. Her head fell forward on his shoulder.

Again Harry—bewildered, sore disillusioned, preyed upon by the insects of suspicion within his heart—missed

the turnstile Fate offered. His hands sustained her gently and firmly, but without warmth.

"You are hysterical," he said quietly. "Sit down—here." He pressed her back into his chair. Then he turned away to a cupboard, and she heard the clink of glasses. "Drink this," he commanded, rather peremptorily, at last. Her hand shook so violently that he held the glass to her lips himself.

She swallowed a few sips of brandy, and drew back. "I am so afraid!" she muttered passionately; "so—afraid . . . so afraid. . . . Harry!" She clutched his jacket, as he turned away to put down the glass. "Harry. . . . Oh, I beseech you—I *beseech* you. . . . Don't let go——"

Manlike, he had not sufficient intuition to comprehend the full significance of her words. In all the revolting horrors of the divorce courts, through which she was to be dragged—through the scandal which would close around his name, the name he had worked up into such honorable prominence—he saw only the surface value of her fear. And, as often before, her youth struck him forcibly—that childlike, not-of-the-world air—almost aura—in which she dwelt. He removed her clutching fingers slowly, with a little pressure of reassurance.

"You must not work yourself up into such a state of fear, or you will be ill. I shall not 'let go,' as you call it. Of course I will attend to the—the legal business for you. I will do my best, for both our sakes. Sometime, when—we can talk calmly, we will go into the matter."

"Oh? . . . Er . . . Yes." Her hands fell from his, dropping heavily on the broad leather arms of the chair. "I was not thinking about that. . . ."

A frown of utter mystification drew down his brows. In what world did this huddled, white-faced little figure dwell? All the disgrace and scandal, which would have

crushed another, appeared to pass over her head like a cloud that shadows, but never touches, a little bark on the sea.

"It's—*afterward*—— Our life together," she whispered tentatively. He looked away into the dying embers of the fire. And again he missed one of those psychological moments when one grain of self-revelation would have exceeded in riches a reserved man's millions. His voice sounded utterly emotionless, giving no clue to the conflicts of his own heart.

"I can not discuss that yet, Leo. Perhaps soon . . . I may see daylight. At present I can only repeat my words of the other night. . . . But, whatever happens, I—I will try to be fair. . . . When I know what is our duty I——"

"Duty?" With infinite scorn she flung out the hated word. Then, with a miserable laugh, she rose unsteadily to her feet. "I see. . . . You—you are weighing me in the scales? Anaylzing me like—like a germ? Trying to adjust yourself—and me—and—duty? . . . Ha!" With another sobbing laugh she turned away. "I might have known! . . . I—I was a fool to come. . . . But I hoped. . . . I needed——"

Not trusting her trembling voice any further, she pulled open the door and vanished as suddenly as she had come. Harry was left alone, staring into the gray ashes of the grate. . . .

Weighed. Analyzed. Adjusted. Considered through the frigid lens of duty. . . . Of such clay was composed the so-called love of Harry, her husband. A clay that congealed into a hard cold substance.

And the love of a friend? . . . Faith. Protection. Self-sacrifice. Hot springs causing warm showers of understanding to soften the crust freezing around her heart.

Her frenzied appeal had failed. Until the path of duty lay clear; until all notes of love were swept away so that his

eyes were not blinded; until Harry was sure of her complete subjugation—her betrayal of all that side of her nature symbolized in Val—she could wait alone, in torment of mind, deadness of heart, spiritual torture. . . .

With hard set lips and coldly critical eyes she passed in review all the unexpected littleness in Harry which had jarred during their marriage. These she had considered but surface matters. Deliberately she had refused to admit the possibility of their source being fundamental. She had clung to the inherent greatness which had seemed to balance—more than balance. . . . Now she turned her back upon that which had balanced. She saw only littleness—littleness at the core, not upon the surface. . . .

There was nothing little about Val. His every action was on a big free scale. He would sin greatly, if at all; act nobly without thought of self, if inspired; succeed greatly; fail splendidly; love—divinely. . . .

In the past Leo, hard in outraged rectitude, hard in her very idealism, had sat in judgment, condemned, allowed no appeal. For that past self she felt nothing now save scorn . . . scorn and a wild desire for reparation. Reparation? . . . Reparation? . . . It lay in her power. . . .

During the week-end the meaning of that word clutched with the other insidious tendrils at her heart. And during that week-end a strange sense of unreality possessed her. Again she seemed to be standing outside herself, watching—listening—waiting—wondering in a detached manner what that self would do. She accompanied it upon its lonely walks and drives, watched it swallow tasteless food—felt sorry for it and also a little impatient. . . .

And again the subterranean river of slowly forming resolve sent up its spring of big decision with unexpected suddenness, flooded thus to overflow by the smallest tributaries.

On Monday morning a letter from Val—in the scrawl

that, to Harry, always seemed formed from liquid fire, not ink—stared up from the breakfast table. It drew his gaze and held it, fascinated, throughout his hurried meal. Leo purposely came down late nowadays. Their meals together had become intolerable. When she entered the room the letter was the first thing she noticed. Instinctively, hurriedly, she glanced across at Harry. Their eyes met. In his she read a challenge—and a reminder.

The full import of this moment was clear to Leo. She watched herself pick up the envelope, hesitate, then lay it down and pour out her coffee. And she watched Harry unexpectedly get up, come round the table and lay his hand on the fatal letter. She heard his voice—insistent, with a note of impatience bordering upon desperation.

"Are you going to burn this letter, Leo?—or shall I?"

And she saw herself, with suddenly flaming cheeks and flashing eyes, spring to her feet, snatch the envelope from under his fingers, and thrust it deep within the bosom of her frock.

"No!" her voice cried passionately. "No . . . I have told you. . . . I refuse to give up—my friends."

She heard the deathly silence which, like a tangible thing, fell upon the room.

"Very well," that even desperate voice replied at last. He turned slowly to the door, then looked back, one hand pressing the woodwork heavily. "You remember? Of course you understand?"

She set her lips and stared hard at her plate, without replying.

But after that one flash of passion, a great and deadly calm descended upon Leo. Val's letter—which she loved for its very rashness in the circumstances—craved for news. When could he come and meet her husband? He had been spending hours with lawyers, "wallowing in muck." What

was Leo doing with herself? And when would Harry return from Paris? She had promised to let him know. . . .

Life, love and courage beckoned with warm enticing hands. . . .

All morning she spent alone in the garden, brooding. In the afternoon she drove to the links. Only a few players were there, and none asked her to join them. After three or four holes she returned to the club-house, surprising Freda Dawes and Violet Hawkes in a confidential talk over their tea. Their voices dropped when she approached. They eyed her queerly, with a polite but stilted greeting. Before she was out of earshot, a few words and a little giggle caused her face to set yet more into its strange mask-like rigidity. On the way home she passed Susie with her pram. In palpable confusion Susie turned toward the cottage door of a parishioner. . . .

Weighed. Analyzed. Considered through the gossip-loving eyes of self-complacency. That was the attitude of Willerton, wherein lay the path of duty into which she might be forced. . . .

In utter calm, in benumbing deadness of mind and spirit, she ate her lonely tea. Then she heard her voice—cool and collected—ordering her little car. . . . Saying something to Ross about visiting friends for the night. . . . She found herself ascending the stairs, hesitating, returning to the hall and, with sudden resolve, entering Harry's study. She sat down at his table and deliberately took up a pen and a sheet of paper. The essence of those past scenes yet clung about the room, causing her to shiver involuntarily. She began to write quickly. . . .

But all at once another essence seemed to be wafted in on the evening sunshine, obliterating the first. It was an essence redolent of Harry—the aroma of his brand of tobacco, the careful, methodical order of everything upon his

writing-table, the *feel* of his quiet personality pervading even the chair in which she sat.

From outside herself, still watching in detachment, she saw hot tears blind her eyes, scald her cheeks, fall upon the written page. . . . Breaking off the writing, which she could not see, she hurriedly placed the sheet in an envelope, turned away without another glance at the familiar objects in the room, and went quickly up-stairs.

And presently, she saw herself standing before her open wardrobe surveying critically the clothes hanging therein. No tears dimmed her eyes now. They were hard and practical.

"It will be cold, driving," she heard her lips mutter. "Very cold. . . . My fur coat, I think. . . . Yes." . . .

Harry did not return home until dinner-time. One of the unexpected events continually cropping up in a huge business with many branches, called him to Manchester next day. He ordered the car to catch the early morning train from Cuvingham, and went straight up-stairs to dress.

Much talk had taken place behind the scenes, to-night—much conjecture. But Pomfrey was too dignified and well-trained to vouchsafe any remark to his master, when the dinner-gong sounded. Of late Leo had seized upon any excuse to absent herself from the strain of their meals together. Harry, therefore, noted her absence silently and without apprehension. Whether the added dreariness that had pressed down his heart since breakfast cast an extra shadow over the opposite side of the table, he could not tell. But the empty chair there looked curiously desolate. The room, in fact, seemed so unusually gloomy that he ordered another light to be switched on. Jutting from the wall candle-fashion, that would have shed its radiance just above Leo's head, illuminating every shining wave of her hair. In the past he had frequently ordered it to be turned on for

that very purpose. After a trying day spent in an office, the picture thus formed had proved singularly refreshing, stimulating, yet soothing. A vision rose before him now so realistically as to appear almost tangible. . . . And it was followed by another vision, a succession of visions. . . . That soft, silky, glorious hair! . . . How often had he felt its pressure against his cheek, or upon his breast, in the dark silent hours of the night. . . . One little wave near her ear, he had once laughingly remarked, just fitted his forefinger, like a deep thimble. She had called it "his thimble" ever afterward. . . .

Abruptly he lowered his eyes to his plate. Rather unexpectedly, since his return from Paris, with the merging of past specters into present realities, these foolish little tender memories had persistently chased each other—playing a tantalizing game of hide-and-seek about his mind. And they added a new torture to a torture-chamber already full. They made the reality so much harder to face. . . . And the reality now concerned the letter at breakfast, those passionate words proving her choice of the alternatives his warning had convyed. . . .

Leaving the dessert untouched, he rose impatiently and left the room. The dogs in the hall greeted his appearance rapturously. While fondling them, he noticed the absence of Mink. The little Yorkshire was probably up-stairs, curled on its mistress's bed. . . . He turned away to his study, followed by the old Airedale that had been a companion of many years, and threw himself down in his armchair.

These evenings, unless they held work of some kind, were becoming a nightmare. Newspapers failed to hold his attention. The bridge club bored him, and he never went there now. All the frequent local meetings irritated him profoundly. . . . He was conscious of a hollow well of empti-

ness stretching below everything that once had seemed so important. Even the views of people with whom he had wished to associate now irritated him with a sense of pettiness. . . . Harry supposed his nerves were "on edge" with domestic worries. Even work could not concentrate his thoughts. . . . He reflected upon to-morrow's business in Manchester with a tired feeling of distaste. The point at issue—was it worth while? Trying to focus his mind upon it, the vision of Leo, barefooted, scantily clad, huddled in this chair, rose instead to distract him. In fancy he felt again the frenzied grasp on his arms. . . He rose and walked to the window, drew the curtains and looked out. And another vision of Leo standing in this same spot came between him and the night sky. "What it might be! . . . What it might be!" she had cried. . . .

To Harry also the room had become permeated with the essence of past scenes. He walked resolutely to his writing-table. There were notes to be made for to-morrow. . . . Was Leo asleep? . . . Notes to be made of something or other for to-morrow. . . .

His own name in Leo's irregular writing on a white envelope scattered his confused memories. Wondering vaguely what fresh trouble—what rash resolve—had caused her to write instead of seeing him to-night, he picked up the envelope and tore it open. . . . His limbs seeming suddenly to give way, he sank into the chair and read each word again—

"I can't bear it any longer. You won't believe the truth. If you loved me you would have trusted. No man but you has ever"—a few suspicious blots and smudges ended that line; then the impulsive words went on—"owned me. I could have loved you so. How much, only my own heart will ever know. But you don't want that kind of love.

The world and you are ready to damn me without cause. Now you shall have cause. You *shall.* I am going to Val now, at once. When you receive this, I shall be with him. So you need have no 'divided allegiance.' You will find the car in your usual London garage. I am keeping nothing of yours save little Mink. He was your first present"—more blurs and blots—"I can't—oh, Harry——"

With a big smudge and unsigned, the letter broke off abruptly.

A gray hue spread slowly over Harry's face. He sat gripping the open page with inert numb fingers. From somewhere near his ears sounded the metallic thump of an iron hammer upon stone. . . . Then the paper fluttered from his hands and he grasped the arms of his chair, feeling the old nauseating weakness creep over his limbs—the weakness that for the last ten years had lurked, an enemy in the dark. . . .

A few weeks ago the bottom had seemed to drop out of his world. Now, amid the paralyzing weakness, he was conscious of all the walls and roofs, the castles and homelier dwellings, crashing around too, falling away also into the void. . . .

A paw on his knee, recalled him at last to his surroundings. He glanced vacantly into his dog's brown eyes, and beyond, to the open letter on the writing-table. He realized, with detached surprise, that he felt no anger against the writer, at that moment. All the anger of the past days had merged into a stupor of horror. He took the letter and slowly read it through again.

The impulsive words were so characteristic that Leo seemed to be speaking them. Hearing them thus, in her voice, something of the cry echoing through each penetrated the mists of darkness shrouding his heart: "No man

but you has ever owned me. . . . I could have loved you so." From the armchair rose another cry: "I am so afraid—so afraid. . . . Oh, I beseech you . . . don't let go."

Again the letter dropped to the table. He buried his face in shaking hands.

What caused that fear he had thought but a childish dread of consequences? Of what had her woman's heart—to which he held no key—been afraid? Was it fear of a *force?* Of that force which baffled and dismayed him, more than any rival of flesh and blood? Or was it fear of the man who seemed subtly to represent that force in her life? What power did he possess? What enticement stronger than the love she could have given to himself?

Old memories of another woman, lured from all the bulwarks of honor and duty, rose to torment him. His father—a "severely upright" man—had cast off that other, allowing her to go alone to her agony and death. The horror over Leo's action became temporarily overshadowed by new fear of his own. What had he done? What in blindness had he allowed that perhaps he alone might have prevented? . . . Yet she loved the man! Her lips had confessed her love. Her every action had confessed it. Sooner than renounce his claims she deliberately chose to defy her husband, to ignore threats, to risk to the utmost honor, reputation, his own faith. . . .

"Leo!" He muttered her name over and over. . . . "Leo. . . . What have you done? . . . What have—we—done? . . . My little Leo?" . . .

But, with the tongue of a serpent, the memory of this morning's scene and letter flashed up with a fresh trend of ideas. Was this sudden flight the result of that letter? While striving himself in his conscientious, struggling way to find the light in this dark labyrinth, was that other working secretly, insidiously, poisonously? While he honestly

endeavored to reconcile his wife's ideas of honor with his own, to gain the mastery over himself, to ensure a firm foundation for their future life together, was that other taking advantage of the force at his command—the force that lay beyond the limits of reason?

Harry sprang to his feet in sudden impotent fury, and paced up and down the room. The dog cowered under the table, terrified of the look in his master's eyes.

And the early light of dawn stealing in, found the man yet pacing . . . pacing . . . to and fro. . . .

At last, without consciousness of volition, he found himself up-stairs at the door of Leo's room. He opened it mechanically and went in. For a long moment he stood in the darkness, his gaze focused by the faint gray square outlining the window. The emptiness he felt without seeing was awful to Harry. It seemed as if he dared not switch on the light and face that emptiness. . . . Gradually the outline of the bed grew visible. An empty cold bed which had been so warm and radiant with her glowing beauty under the hanging light. . . . Her vivid smile and outstretched hand had welcomed him so often. . . .

Gray now, dark, infinitely desolate. . . .

Like a man just blinded by some unexpected explosion, Harry stretched out his hand and stumbled toward the bed. He sank down upon it, threw his arms across the pillows, and buried his head where often it had lain before. . . .

And with seeming inconsequence a word rose to taunt him—a word from one of "those things for which he had no time"—a word he remembered hearing in a poem and quoting to Leo after their marriage service. A word made to rhyme with Lenore—

" 'Nevermore' . . . 'Nevermore' . . . Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.' "

CHAPTER XI

VALYRAN'S holiday resembled that of the proverbial busman. Though claimed by no operatic contract for a time, the claims on his good nature were many. London was filling up. Private and public concerts for charities abounded. Concert singing held for him as little attraction as being "lionized." For the sake of distraction he endured both.

An artist's inconsequence—one foot on earth, the other flung gaily into space; one eye searching for beauty in every face, flower, song, of the world, the other lost among that hidden in the clouds—proves simultaneously his delight, his charm and his undoing.

The damnable effects of such inconsequence had trapped Val again, as often before. But this time the shackles fell not only around his own limbs, but around those of the woman he loved. A year ago he would have seized passionately this chance of freedom, which at the same time bound Leo to him. Without daring to formulate the hope, he knew what lay behind his mind when he journeyed to Switzerland. . . .

And lately the devils let loose in Switzerland had stirred again within his heart. Leo stood on the balance. Half her nature yearned for him. With her awakened woman's knowledge, whispered the devils, the struggle this time might be—would be—easier. . . . Her husband was playing into his hands. Every inch of the widening gulf set Leo's feet more firmly within the portals of the home her husband did not share. . . .

When her presence was removed, he became a prey once more to the old struggle between the lion in the angel's form and that other. But the past year had taught him stronger tactics. Resolutely disarming the most subtle foe—procrastination—he fled to his solicitors to lodge his defense. That done, he rested on his lance, so to speak, and heard his enemies recoil, muttering uncertainly.

About eleven o'clock on the Monday evening he returned to his rooms after singing at a concert. These rooms had belonged to him since pre-war days. He had furnished them bit by bit, prompted by the mood of the moment, and often by Leo. No exotic splendor or oriental seductiveness distinguished them. The paint was white, the walls of his music-room a soft-toned gray. Golf-clubs and tennis-racquets elbowed piles of music and shelves stacked with books. Comfortable chairs and thick rugs dotted the polished floor, whereon the grand piano stood well to the fore—a friend always ready, generally in use.

Val sank into an armchair, congratulating himself upon his evasion of a supper-party. Talk—talk—bubble—glitter, froth. . . . Everything nowadays save Leo and music jarred. He placed the two in that order deliberately. His inspiration, his degradation, the friend of his intellect, the sharer of his soul, the gay comrade, the woman whose faith had saved him from himself—in the magic of every note her voice lay hidden; her face rose, swayed before him, upon every rhythmic throb. . . .

She had offered him this chance of freedom, in the splendid generosity of her friendship. And nobody but Val himself would ever know the temptation hidden in that proffered sacrifice. . . . He had, so far, resisted, but—— Would ever again such a wondrous opportunity arise to cast off his shackles? The fight upon which, in such haste, he had embarked, would, if successful, leave him where he had

struggled for so long bound by galling fetters to lifelong loneliness.

Rising impatiently, he flung himself upon the piano stool and sought to banish the strange sense of foreboding that had haunted the dreariness of his thoughts all evening. His long fingers rambled a little wildly over the keys, sometimes improvising to the words of a poem not set to music; sometimes wandering into the accompaniment of songs. Restlessly, at last, he drew out the score of an opera and practised some difficult passages. Then, throwing it down again, he allowed his hands to wander in unison with his mind, over old forgotten fragments. And, presently, with a little smile, he found himself in Poe's old passionate song of love. The pathos of the words found an echo in his own soul. Each note soft and tense with feeling, he sang the first verse, and then the tenderness of his voice, vibrant with memory, with longing, with passionate sincerity, passed into the next:

"*I* was a child and *she* was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea:
But we loved with a love that was more than love—"

A quick nervous rattle of the door-handle shattered his illusions; brought him quickly back to earth. Aware of another presence in the room, he turned round. And for once Val's fingers clanged discordantly upon the keyboard. He sprang to his feet with a cry.

Leo stood on the threshold and held out two trembling hands.

He looked at her stupidly, making wild efforts to grasp his self-control. This appearance, in the very midst of the passionate longing for once unchecked in his voice, came with the shock of an apparition called up by his own emotions. Though the figure and face were those of Leo, he scarcely recognized the spirit they clothed. Her eyes clung

to his in a frightened way strangely unlike their usual candor. Realizing that she was shaking in every limb, he put an arm round her shoulders and drew her forward, closing the door behind her.

"What is it? . . . Dear, you are trembling so! Tell me what has happened." . . .

She grasped his free arm, and her voice sounded as frightened as her eyes still looked.

"Val . . . you . . . told me I—had your love——" Her voice, scarcely more than a whisper, trailed away. His clasp tightened convulsively; but he only muttered something incoherent in assurance.

"I—I can't go on without it. I have left Harry. . . . Val, I have come to you if—you——"

For one intoxicated moment Val's reeling senses lost themselves in the depths of her frightened eyes. Then he crushed her up against him so fiercely that she gasped for breath. All the bitterness of his starved heart, all the passionate craving for the woman he had never thought would be his, rushed to his lips in a choking cry as he pressed them to her own.

So still she lay . . . so still. . . .

By degrees the man's dazed mind cleared. He became conscious of her passivity and loosened a little his hold. With one shaking hand he removed the hat she wore.

"Take off your coat," he whispered unsteadily. Still utterly passive, she allowed him to draw each arm free of the fur motoring-coat. He threw it across a chair and half-led, half-carried her to the big settee.

"You are worn out," he murmured, his cheek against her hair. Laying her down among the cushions, he fell on his knees and hid his face upon her breast. Her hands stole round his neck with a clinging, almost protective movement.

But she stared across his bowed dark head with the eyes of one who sees nothing. . . .

"I—have—left—Harry," she heard her voice saying again dully.

He raised his face and found her lips once more. "Forget . . . forget . . . my belovedest! . . . You have come—home again. . . . Forget all else now save you and me." . . . Pushing the hair from her brow, he kissed her eyes, one after the other. "Is it real? . . . Can you be real? . . . *You?* . . . after haunting me by day and by night? Ah, Leo! I have yearned for you. . . . My darling! . . . I have yearned for you! . . . Your voice has been in every chord. . . . Your hair in every ray of the sun. . . . Your face has looked up at me from every seat in the dark theaters. . . . It has lain on my pillow. . . . Oh, how I love you!" He caught her close in his arms and whispered his passionate cry into her lips. "I can say the words to you now . . . sing them . . . shout them to the world—I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you." . . .

Half-sobbing, he buried his face again upon her own. All his turbulent spirit was unburdening itself at last. Yet there was no trace now of the animalish lack of self-control which once had revolted her. Leo could cling to him tonight, her own starved heart soothed by the warmth that showered around it. But still her eyes held that peculiar, unseeing, distant look. . . .

Into the silence of the room a little sound presently penetrated: a little whispering sound. Val raised himself, startled. "What's that?"

The girl listened, and her hands fell away from him. "It's Mink—my little dog. I left him in the outer passage with . . . with my . . . bag."

Something in the falter of her voice caused him to look at her rather oddly. He rose slowly to his feet.

"I will fetch him."

Sitting upright, she pushed back her tumbled hair, and glanced round the room which she had not visited for so long. The furniture was the same. Yet everywhere she felt a strange, subtle difference. Even the sound of the traffic outside held a different tone. When, with a little scuffle and whimpers of delight, Mink shot across the floor and bounded into her lap, she clutched him spasmodically: his little body brought a comforting sense of tangibility into this unreal world. Val was evidently taking her suit-case into another room: she heard the opening and shutting of doors and his quick light tread. A tiny wave of uneasiness crossed her mind. . . . Presently he reentered the music-room. The same odd light, a little intensified, shone in the eyes that quickly searched for hers. For a moment she was conscious of the same subtle strangeness, yet familiarity, in him, that she had felt in his room. Her spirit had, as it were, come home, receiving a warmth of welcome eminently satisfying, yet disconcerting: for the home was the same, but the furniture had been recovered: fresh shades put on the familiar lamps, causing a new light to pervade all the odd corners. He was no longer to her the old Val. She had given him the right, now and for the future, to assume a different rôle, a rôle which would embrace far more than spiritual comradeship. . . . Just the faintest echo of her fear on the Scheidegg Pass sounded in the quaver of her voice:

"Are you alone . . . here?" . . .

"Yes." He came close to her; bent and pressed her hair with his cheek. "Quite alone, Leo *mia*." . . .

Then he sat down, and clasped both her hands. "Why did you not write—send for me? You promised——"

"Val! Val! I don't know—oh, I hardly know what I have done or said during this last week! I—have been moving in a nightmare—a cold terrible nightmare——"

"That's over—all over." He drew her close again. "There shall be no more coldness. . . . Don't tremble so, my dearest! Tell me all about it."

In halting broken sentences she described the interviews with Harry, the outward dreariness, the inward bitterness, that had culminated in this desperate step. Val listened intently, without a word of interruption. His vivid imagination was able to supply much that her mere words lacked. It supplied, too, a thread of which she was ignorant. The thread was of dun color. It entered like a shuttle the turmoil of his mind—twined around it, shot to and fro, catching and entwining other threads. As it grew larger, the brilliance faded somewhat from his eyes; something heavy crept into his heart. She was unconscious of all this: her hands still lay warmly in his clasp.

"He—didn't understand . . . wouldn't try to understand——" The tears were running unchecked down her face. "He could talk—like that—hint of divorce—threaten. . . . Ah, Val! it was a choice between you and that cold. . . . I couldn't bear it!—I couldn't face it!" Feverishly her fingers clutched his hands. "It was not fair that you should sacrifice this chance of freedom for—that. There would have been no happiness. Just mistrust—cold, cold duty. . . . Oh! It's not worth it! I couldn't bear it!"

She hid her face on his shoulder and sobbed. Val sat perfectly still, save that his lips murmured her name caressingly. But his eyes this time were staring unseeingly across her hair. By instinct they clung to the piano. The dun-colored shuttle knocked more heavily at his heart. . . .

Presently she raised her head a little. "You need make no defense now. You shall be free, at last. . . . Free!"

"Free!" His lips echoed the word; but there was no exultation in the sound. She drew back and looked at him.

"Yes. . . . Why? . . . What is it?"

He met her eyes, gazing into them for a time, infinite tenderness but infinite yearning in his own. "Leo . . . if your husband had shown any tenderness—if he had broken through his reserve—had unbent one inch—you—would not be here now!"

"Val!"

A pathetically bitter little laugh answered her cry—that cry which was so full of fear, the fear of knowledge. "If his love had poured around you as—as mine has—would you have found the choice between us—to be any choice?"

"Ah! Val! . . . Val, my dear——"

Val had dropped his forehead into his hands. He spoke through his fingers. "Your heart knows it would not. You have come to me in your desolation for the love I can give you— The love that *is* you. . . . You have come in your divine generosity with hands full of—of the kind of love you have always given me, not——" He broke off, then went quickly on again: "You would sacrifice your name, your home, your all, for—a *friend.* For my freedom. Leo, is that freedom going to be worth the cost?" Rising impetuously, he laid a hand on her shoulder. "Do you understand what I mean? Oh, my darling, you are his. . . . His . . . not mine! You know it. Your every look and gesture have proved it. . . . Your response to me" . . . He turned away passionately. "Don't you suppose I have not realized? Especially since . . . I fetched the little dog in." . . .

Her face now was hidden in her hands. He walked restlessly to the piano; struck a chord at random; and turned back to her.

"I should not be free, Leo. Instead, I should be branded—a thief . . . handcuffed for ever——"

"Ah! No! No! What are you saying?" She uncovered her face and looked up quickly. "I am giving—*giving.* Of my own free will. How could you be——"

"Because"—his eyes caught and held her own—"because you can't give what isn't yours. It belongs to another."

"Val! . . . Val! He does not want it. He does not care——"

Val caught her by the arms, as she rose and dropped Mink, unheeded, on the couch. "How do you know? Suppose you are mistaken?" He laughed harshly. "The idea is to me impossible. . . . With you for—for his wife! . . . The shock of all this—how can you tell what suffering his reserve may be hiding. . . intentionally hiding?"

"This is only the culmination. I have told you. In spirit we have been always estranged. Val, I am *yours*—in that sense . . . not his." . . . Her voice trailed away. The man's eyes, like dumb, hurt, live things, were searching hers to the very soul. The little dog, forgotten, jumped down and clawed, whimpering, at her skirt. Drawing free, she stooped and lifted him in her arms, unconsciously cradling him as if he were a child.

"Mink is all I have brought away—of his," she muttered, almost to herself. "He was . . . was Harry's first present." Her head drooped low over the tiny body. . . .

Val, motionless, watched her with his dumb hurt eyes. Every gesture brought cruel stabs of illumination. The shuttle's thump had become a gnawing pain which caused the room to seem suddenly chilly. He shivered involuntarily. At last, when the silence had lasted for long, he spoke, with hurried decision.

"I am going to your husband."

She swung round, terror blanching yet more her pale face. "What good would that do? He has received my letter—now. He thinks . . . he will believe we . . . oh, I daren't let you meet him! I daren't! There is something awful about Harry when he is enraged. And—*now*——"

"I'm not afraid." He smiled a little at her own fears. "I must see him. I must—*know* . . . *know,* Leo. Don't you see why? I can't accept what you offer until—unless I *know*— Oh, God help me! . . . What ought I to do? What ought I to do?"

She laid a tentative hand on his as if in reply. He grasped it tightly, and again searched the bottommost depths of her eyes. "Leo . . . have you faced all the future—with *me?* . . . Without, perhaps, seeing him ever again. . . . Ah! you see? You love him . . . you love him! You say you are mine in—spirit. Would that suffice for a whole lifetime? I care too much to be satisfied with that—alone. And you could not give two men what—all you have given to one. . . . I understand you too well, Leo. . . . In a few years—months maybe—my love might destroy what you could give. It did once before." . . . He turned away and paced across the room. "You spoke about the noose strangling you. Would you strangle us all—in a noose of lifelong regret?"

She sank down on the couch again, exhausted by the unexpected fresh strain coming on top of her past turmoil. "It won't be regret. I have faced *everything.* And you might as well try to draw milk from an icicle as talk with Harry. He won't listen. And think of the mud he may throw at you!—At us both——"

"There will be plenty of that in any case. Mud only sticks outside for a time. The weeds that grow inside are what count."

She lay back against the cushions with a trembling, sobbing breath.

"It is too late now. . . . Oh, I am so tired . . . so tired. Don't make me struggle any more."

At once he came to her side, and threw an arm around her. Long ago, Val had been weak, groveling, passion-

tossed, blind to consequences; and she, with the strength of purity, had saved them both. Now, with almost supernatural insight and calm, the man realized the momentious issues involving the lives of three people. And the issues rested entirely in his own hands. On one side the forbidden fruit for which he yearned lay ready and ripe for his plucking—the very bough was here within his arms to break, to mar, or to perfect. . . . On the other side . . . he closed his eyes, instinctively shutting out the dreariness of that desert track. Drawing the girl close he kissed, with the passionate tenderness of desperate resolve, her hair and brow.

In the action she read surrender to her will. Conscious of a mixed turmoil of emotions, she raised a hand and touched his cheek caressingly.

"Why do you talk like this? Haven't I longed for you? Lived for your letters? Are you . . . isn't your own love—the same?"

A clock struck one. She felt his arms shiver suddenly. He drew a little away.

"Come!" he said, with unusual peremptoriness.

She caught her breath and clutched the couch, misunderstanding his meaning. He saw the action and understood it with horrible clarity of vision. But his eyes met hers with a little smile. And, flashing strangely across her mind at such a moment, the face of "Midir"—its ethereality and its little smile of victory—seemed to bend over her instead of Val's own face.

"I love you," he whispered again, "just the same. So much, that I am going to take you away from here at once."

"Away!" she gasped, still misunderstanding.

"You must not stay here, with me . . . to-night."

He rose, dragging her up with him. She struggled, trying vainly to free herself. And suddenly his arms clutched her close to his heart.

"If I prove you are right"—his voice was so low she could scarcely hear the words—"no power on earth shall come between you and me . . . you and me . . . you! . . . Come, Leo, for heaven's sake! I am not made of iron. . . . Until I know . . . you must not be seen here."

"Val!" she cried, pulling him forcibly back, "where could I go at this hour? It's too late."

"It's not. . . . Here is your coat. . . . Hotels are open. Where did you hide yourself last summer?" He was forcing her arms into her coat-sleeves.

"In Kensington. Old Marty. Yes . . . she would take me in. But, Val——"

"Come!" His voice sounded hoarse. He struggled into his own coat and made for the door. "You are not in a fit state to reason to-night. Nor am I. But I *know* . . . I *know*." . . .

"My bag——"

"Is in . . . it's in my room . . . come."

Again from the doorway, the pale face of "Midir" seemed to gaze down into her own—his arm to entice her away to somewhere distant, somewhere unknown to the world of hard plain facts. . . . Impelled, fascinated almost by the glow in his deep eyes, she picked up her little dog and followed unsteadily, clutching the receding arm. . . .

At about eight o'clock next morning a taxi from Cuvingham Station surprised the inhabitants of Willerton who were out in the roads. Passing the church and vicarage, it whirled up the main village street, down the lane to The Towers, and through the open lodge gate.

Val leaned forward, scanning quickly every tree or bush in the long avenue, every well-trimmed bed and smooth stretch of lawn which the drive led past, until the huge, creeper-covered house came in sight.

This was the home where Leo's body lived. This was the house wherein her spirit had wandered unmated, craving his in its loneliness. These were the material comforts she had felt—would renounce—for his sake.

After a sleepless night and the early journey, his nerves, under the present stress, seemed each to be a living, vibrating wire. What would be the result of this quixotic adventure? Fulness or emptiness? . . . The forthcoming interview with the man who had conquered Leo's love held for him a curious fascination. He felt the kind of curiosity he would have felt over the instruments about to lacerate his flesh in an operation.

Pomfrey opened the door, looking, as Leo said, like his own effigy.

Mr. Wallis, he informed this unusually early visitor, had left over an hour ago for Manchester . . . on business. . . .

CHAPTER XII

THE people waiting for trains at Cuvingham Station regarded curiously the tall stranger pacing impatiently up and down the platform. Impatience was too foreign to their lives to be appreciated. Their own unemotional features set heavily, their close-cropped heads bulging with self-importance over their own "Business," the men were accustomed to waiting for trains, gazing stolidly at the metal of the line until the engine hove in sight. His grace of movement and vivid picturesque appearance struck them as strange, and therefore freakish. They eyed him with suspicion.

Val studied their demeanor closely, through apparent casual glances. He searched, remembering Leo's words, for the soul she had missed in these eyes which looked as if they visioned figures—figures before which stood an *L* and an *S* and a *D*—endless figures. . . .

"Lord!" he thought. "I can see them enjoying heavily their whisky and their bridge! What else? What else? What else? Oh, my Leo!"

Pomfrey had not expected his master back for several days, but could give no address. Val had gone straight to the works. Armed with a business address only, his nerves yet more fretted by delay, he snatched some breakfast in the town and waited for the next train to Manchester. He felt furiously angry with Wallis.

And this anger gave the devils seeking to shake his resolve an added weapon. He visualized his own actions had

the position been reversed. He imagined himself receiving the letter Leo had left behind. The shock—the awful emptiness—the wild madness of loss—the elemental fury of an animal robbed of its mate. Val could conjure up each phase of such a moment. But . . . business in Manchester, next day! That he could not visualize. On the wings of the wind he would have flown to London; have searched every hole and corner until he found Leo.

"And I should have shot me there pretty quick," he concluded ambiguously.

More than all Leo's words, this action of Harry's made him understand her cry: "It's not worth it." . . .

The words beat in his brain; kept time with his hurried step; goaded him on while sapping his strength. In sheer terror he bought his ticket two hours before the train was due. It formed a frail barrier against the weak craving to give up and to return to Leo.

But still that hidden voice beyond all reason rang insistently, like the reverberating echoes of a bell, below those other menacing words—the voice that had cried last night to Leo: "But I *know* . . . I *know*." . . .

Manchester was reached at last. Val drove straight to the business address. There he was greeted with another delay. A secretary vouchsafed the information that Mr. Wallis had left. "He looked very ill, and went back to his hotel." Val took the name of the hotel and hurried off. This would be better, he reflected, than an interview in an office.

The information of the severe lady of the bureau was corroborated by that of the hall-porter: Mr. Wallis had fetched his luggage about half an hour ago, canceled his room, and gone. . . . And the same rider: "He looked very ill." . . . With an audible curse, Val turned and hurried back to the station. The slow train, with connections for Cuv-

ingham, had just left. A night express started in two hours. Val cursed more thoroughly, and the porter retired discreetly.

Nothing remained but to pace the streets in order to assuage his tortured mind, to have some food, and to wait for the express. Harry presumably had caught the slow train. What was his move? "Business" thrown to the winds. . . . "Very ill." . . . Val fumed at this delay. Missed by half an hour. . . . He began to feel taut, like a wire that would presently break. Unconscious of danger he wandered about the streets, narrowly escaping motors and buses . . . not caring if they ran over him or not.

Arriving at Cuvingham in the early hours of dawn, travel-stained and infinitely weary in body and mind, he went to a hotel and snatched a few hours' restless sleep. Not waiting for breakfast, he telephoned to The Towers. But to his astonishment he learned that Harry had not yet returned—no fresh news had been received of his movements. The same information was vouchsafed later at the works. He was supposed to be still in Manchester. If not, probably unexpected private developments of his business had taken him elsewhere.

With growing uneasiness, Val wandered about the streets; tried to read the newspapers; stared unseeingly into shop-windows. Twice he rang up Willerton. Three times he returned to the works. At last, late in the afternoon, after arranging for a wire immediately any news came through, he caught the train back to town.

Leo's face, white and strained, greeted him from the window in Elizabeth Road. She met him at the door; but neither spoke until they were in the sitting-room.

"I haven't seen him—yet," Val said, and she caught her breath, half in relief, half in consternation, and threw herself into a chair.

He paced restlessly about the room, recounting the two days' experiences; and she understood what he omitted—the struggle, the mental and moral strain, caused by such delay. In hot haste one may achieve the highest aim of quixotic self-sacrifice. But with everything conspiring against that at which his inmost heart revolted, to continue to persevere when every fiber urged capitulation, caused Leo's idealistic heart to acclaim Val. Never had his pedestal been higher—that fatal pedestal upon which she placed those she loved. This characteristic immersion in his work, on Harry's part, filled her with renewed bitterness. The uncertainty in which she had been tossed since crossing her Rubicon cleared one more: her heart became again single of purpose—and the voice of the temptress was added to Val's already tortured mind.

"Isn't this sufficient proof? Doesn't this tell you what you wish to know? His work is all the wife he needs!" With a bitter cry she caught his shoulders; twined clinging arms around his neck. "Val! Val! you wouldn't condemn me to that—that degradation? To be no more than a man's —mistress—for spare hours."

"Hush! Not for all the kingdoms of the world! But I must know. . . . I *must know.*"

"You *do* know. Oh—Val—I can't endure this strain any longer! . . . Nor can you. Give in! Give in! Take me away. Val we—we need each other——"

"For mercy's sake, Leo—stop! stop!" He unclasped her clutching hands and half flung her from him. "Isn't that what my soul is aching to do?" Walking to the window, he stared hard at the waning light of the spring evening. "Something tells me—urges me—something assures me you are wrong. Wrong," he repeated emphatically, turning round. "He looked—very ill. Wherever I went, I was told that—'Very ill.'"

"Ill?" Her hands clutched the back of a chair, and a change he was quick to notice swept across her face. "Very ill? Harry is not strong, fundamentally."

"Where do you think he is?"

"I haven't any idea. Harry was always secretive over his business movements. Things cropped up so suddenly——" With new fear in her eyes, she clung to the chair. "You don't think—— Once he told me that he or Milne might go to South Africa—a new branch is being started there. You don't think——"

"Impossible! Not as suddenly as this. How could he?"

She raised her hands and let them drop again with a helpless gesture of abandonment. Val came across and lightly kissed her hair.

"Put on your things, Leo *mia,* and come out. We will have supper together at a quiet restaurant somewhere." . . .

Uneventful though it seemed, that evening was to prove one of the vividest memories in the girl's life. A new note had crept into Val's attitude toward herself—a note that subtly vibrated protection, encouragement, and a tenderness which for some reason brought tears to her eyes.

After supper they returned to her rooms and talked together. The present turmoil seemed to fade away with the distant traffic. They talked, as in the old days, of all their enthusiasms, their intangible fancies, the dreams that were too fragile and fragrant for the harsh winds of a world of facts. He lay on the hearth-rug, his head against her knee, as he loved to do of old. And for a few of those hours which sometimes fall like manna, all ugliness faded into the beauty of perfect understanding. . . . After a time he rose and drifted toward the piano—Mrs. Marten's little piano, bought with such pride "on the hire system." Val did not look upon it with laughing scorn, as many in his place would have done. He sat down and played and sang to its

doubtful tones as if it were a Bechstein. And Leo loved him for that. She watched his face transfigured as usual when his spirit soared in song. And more than ever was she conscious of his strange power over herself. He drew her in some intangible way—held her—enticed her . . . but not to deeds, in a world of facts. . . .

"Sing 'Midir,' " she murmured impulsively, impelled by these thoughts.

He smiled, struck gently the opening notes, and turned toward her. Never taking his eyes off hers, he sang the song from beginning to end. . . . Then he rose. "That's the last song I am going to sing! Or Marty will send for the police."

With unconscious wistfulness, his glance still lingered on the girl's face. She was wearing a brown velvet frock which enhanced the lights gleaming among her ruddy hair. He thought she had never looked more alluring than now, with her woman's sympathy and understanding shining from her eyes, blending with the tremulous smile upon her lips.

And all this charming, innocent seductiveness had been offered to him . . . was there, now, ready for him. . . .

He jabbed a cigarette upon the back of its case and struck a match hurriedly.

"When I get any news, I shall start off again at once. I will send you a message."

The fragrance of the past hours still clung, like the fragrance of lavender, about her heart. She smiled tenderly.

"Val, I think you are the dearest quixotic old—hero!"

"More probably a damned fool!" he replied lightly. She caught the shadow of his quick, sidelong, "glad-eye" smile. "It's usually the husband who chases the lover, not—— Ah, well!" He met the quick look of pain roused by the irony

of his words, and understood it with sinking heart. "Don't worry, old thing. Somebody is sure to catch somebody some time. . . . There will be news to-morrow." The pitiable wraith of gaiety faded. He turned back from the door and laid his hands on her shoulders. "This is probably the end—one way or another. To-morrow it will be"—he caught his breath and his voice sank lower—"*all*—or—nothing. . . . Will you kiss me good night, Leo?"

She raised her lips at once to his. With the close, lingering tenderness of one setting forth on a long journey, and leaving his treasure behind, his arms closed around her.

"How I love you!" he whispered. "You will always know that . . . whichever way——" Rather abruptly he loosed her and turned away.

She heard the hall-door open and close, followed by his quick tread upon the steps outside. Something impelled her to run to the window and pull aside the blind. He heard her tap the pane, and he looked up and waved. For a moment the light from a street lamp fell full upon his face, revealing the beauty of each feature, together with that peculiar air of ethereality.

Then he moved away into the dusk and vanished round the corner.

Leo drew back into the room, the tender tremulous smile still curling her lips. Quixotic though she called him, nothing could have made surer appeal to her idealism than this determination. He was tilting at a windmill which probably not another man in a thousand would have attempted. For long she sat alone among the lavender fragrance of his personality. In a world wherein the easiest course has become ingenuously covered by the slogan, "Let be: it is Nature!" wherein the present moment is to be grasped regardless of past or future; wherein the infinite word Life is limited by many, often reduced, by its litera-

ture, to a mere gratification of the senses; fragrance such as this is wondrously rare, sublimely stimulating. In the midst of all the mud surrounding her feet, Leo drew in breaths of clear pure air from the "Hollow Hills" where is "No sin nor any shame." The old state of exaltation produced by Val's rare letters to Willerton, later by their day in the Surrey pine woods, warmed her heart, and refreshed her soul. It softened the bitterness toward Harry. During these two days she had wrapped herself round in that bitterness, as a man escaping from fire wraps himself in a thick blanket. Beneath the blanket is a palpitatnig heart, a tender skin. Without, flames and blinding smoke. Leo had drawn her blanket of bitterness close, trying to forget the flames and smoke. But they penetrated unexpected holes, weak patches—and her skin shrank, appalled.

For, stifle the knowledge though she might, within her heart Val's words for ever rang: "If your husband had shown tenderness . . . if his love had poured around you." . . . Ah! that little word, that "If"! Though all the sunlight of the world shine around, though every bit of brass and iron of a machine is nourished, polished, gleaming, will the whole yet vibrate fully if the master hand that adjusts the spark is lacking? Try as she would, Leo could not protect herself with her blanket of bitterness against the thick curling smoke of memory. Thoughts, deemed long forgotten—of past days, past nights, past glimpses of love such as Harry only had awakened—crowded around. Pitifully, she tried to shut her smarting eyes before these flames that might turn into fiery tongues of gnawing, passionate regret—such regret as she dared not contemplate. Harry's quiet mastery of her nature in the early days of their marriage had bound her with hoops of iron whose existence she had never fully realized till now. Could she ever free herself? Ever find just that master hand in Val,

with all her love for him, to touch the vital spark that alone could cause every fiber to vibrate? For two nights now she had lain awake and wept—bitter, hopeless tears for which she could not account. She had been starved at Willerton: one part of her nature entirely starved; the other, during the last months, nourished but intermittently. Now, love shone around; a true, fine love, whose nobility caused her to breathe such sweet pure air; to which she meant to dedicate the rest of her life; to which her soul leaped in wondering admiration.

Yet . . . yet . . . she lay awake and wept. . . .

Val's expectation proved correct. While Leo was eating her breakfast, a messenger came with a note from him. A telegram, evidently despatched from Cuvingham the preceding night, had arrived, stating Harry to be back in Manchester. Val had just time to catch a train. . . .

Leo clutched the letter tightly, burying her face in trembling hands. What torture of unnamable fears had tormented her sleepless hours? Harry was at any rate safe, found. Again, as all through the night, she tried to reason with herself: Harry was not the emotional, ill-balanced man to do desperate deeds; to lose his head in any way. He was immersed in "business." His wife's desertion, steps to be taken in the matter—what did they count? Nothing counted save his public shame. Nothing counted beside the success of that one particular make of motor-car amid the hundreds of inventions the world over. . . . So she drew her bitter blanket close again, resolutely hiding her eyes in its folds while pacing up and down street after street.

She could never remember afterward how she got through the endless hours of that day. She remembered nothing save miles of hard pavement along which she walked . . . walked . . . walked . . .

Val arrived at Manchester soon after midday. He

drove, this time, straight to the hotel. The same severe lady at the bureau eyed him curiously—suspiciously, he fancied. Mr. Wallis, was there, she said; had just come in. . . . She lifted her mouth from the telephone: "What name?"

Upon quick reflection, Val decided not to give his name. "I wish to see him privately. . . . Urgent business. . . . Somewhere alone—where we shall not be interrupted." . . .

The lady called a page, to whom she gave quick instructions. Her manner of terrific efficiency quite frightened Val. Feeling himself dismissed by the shoulder now turned toward him, he followed the page into the lift. Along a corridor that seemed endless, he was led at the rate of about fifty miles an hour . . . round innumerable corners . . . until at last he found himself alone in a small sitting-room.

A queer silence had apparently fallen over the entire world. Val walked to the window, which overlooked a narrow side-street. He noticed a small boy throwing stones for a puppy. He wondered very clearly and seriously how many stones the boy had already thrown, and how many more he meant to throw. If he threw three a minute for an hour, that would be three times sixty . . . one hundred eighty . . . Yes, one hundred eighty. . . But surely the puppy's mouth would get sore? Perhaps the stones were round ones. . . .

For what seemed like hours Val was only conscious of the boy, the stones and the puppy . . . and of a funny twitching sensation in his fingers which he could not control. He had just decided to close his hands to stop the twitching, when a startlingly abrupt turn of the door-handle made his nails bite into the palms they were meeting. . . . He braced his shoulders as if for a high jump and turned round.

CHAPTER XIII

AND this at last was Leo's husband. This was the man of whom the merest thought brought torture unspeakable during lonely months in Africa. This was the master hand from whose hold Leo's heart could never free itself, chafe her spirit never so intolerantly.

Val found himself confronted by a thin figure several inches shorter than himself. But he was not conscious of height or build. He was conscious of *force*—a force he could not remember feeling so intensely before in any man. And, conscious of this force, he thought of Leo . . . and he understood. . . .

For what might have been moments or minutes or hours, the two men faced each other. And Harry too, in a flash of revelation, realized force—a very different, intangible force . . . one that he had come to fear as he never before had feared any thing or person.

The horizontal lines formed deep furrows on his brow; the lips, half-revealed by his small mustache, looked cruelly grim; but his cheeks were gray and bloodless. Val became aware at last that he was meeting what Leo graphically called "pieces of steel," set in bluish hollows. Quite impersonally he felt a throb of pity which impelled him forward. The spell broke. Harry closed the door but made no advance.

"Mr. Valyran, I presume?" And the even icy tones caused Val's impetuous footsteps to halt. Again he thought of Leo and again—he understood.

"Why have you come here?"

"I must speak to you. You—you are mistaken in . . . I wish to explain." A raised hand stemmed his embarrassed attempts to force a hole through the ice barrier.

"All explanations can be made to my solicitors. Other—communication between you and me is impossible."

For a moment Val felt all Leo's sense of impotence when trying to break down Harry's barrier. He wondered helplessly how on earth he could get hold—no jutting crags appeared in that smooth sheet of ice. "It's not worth it . . . not worth it . . ." whispered a voice within. But he looked across at the other's lined face and, for an instant, a naked soul, quivering as his own, seemed to flash from a crevice behind the gray mask. The sight—or, rather, intuition—caused the spring sunshine to grow dim to Val's perception. The other voice rose within, triumphant but with the triumph of a death-knell: "I *know* . . . I *know*." . . .

Gripping the back of a chair, he hurled himself straight through the crevice, with the first words that came tumbling into his mind.

"Wallis . . . I know what you think . . . what you must, naturally, think. But you are mistaken. I *swear* it. You—— Preposterous as it sounds I am—I am your *friend* . . . your . . . your wife's—*friend*. . . . Oh, my God, man! *Listen*. . . . Don't shut your ears and your heart."

Harry, with a gesture of infinite contempt, had laid his hand again on the door-handle as if about to end this mad scene. Val shot forward and threw his arm across the door.

"You shall listen! For two days I have been chasing you to make you understand the truth. . . . You *shall* hear it. . . . Your wife is in her old rooms in Kensington. She—is—not—with—me! She has been there . . . waiting for you since . . . since Monday. There's plenty of proof, if you won't believe me."

"Monday . . . since . . ." Harry fell back, and again Val caught a glimpse behind the mask. He hurried on, not giving the adversary without nor the devils within time to collect themselves.

"I came here Tuesday to find you . . . to send you to her."

"After"—Harry flashed a look so full of suspicion that Val was almost tempted to strike him. "Are you mad? You tell me—*this*—after that letter on Monday? After enticing her——"

"Letter? Letter?" A harsh laugh broke from Val's lips upon perceiving the drift of the other man's mind. "You thought my letter—— Oh, good heavens! You thought it was a put-up job? . . . Of course . . . of course. . . . It was natural." . . . He leaned his back against the door and looked fully into Harry's eyes, and the light in his own was the light of truth. "That letter asked for *you*. I wrote to ask when I could see *you*—not her. I wished to make you understand the falsity in those damned charges. Lord!" He swung away to the window and stared out at the houses opposite. "Where is your faith? Where is your faith? You thought Leo . . . *Leo* . . . your wife . . . capable of plotting . . . Good God!"

For several tense moments no sound broke the silence of the room. Val's look also had revealed a naked soul. And it was a soul transparently clear with the clarity of truth. Harry, man of business, alert to every subterfuge, ready to meet the frequent plotting and scheming which mar the fine spirit of trade, felt all at once abashed. He sank into a chair by the table, gripping his head as if to force down the throbbing pulses that blurred his usually lucid mind. Val presently looked round, his own face full of withering contempt which vanished at sight of the bowed shoulders. The heated words on his lips remained unuttered. He came to the table and sat down on the edge.

"Whatever action you mean to take, you shall know the truth," he said insistently. "I love Leo. . . . There! I confess it. I love her. . . . I . . . Last year, when she trusted me so implicitly—when she joined me in Switzerland—I betrayed her trust. I don't think, in her blessed loyalty, she had told you fully about that? Well . . . to her purity I owe my—honor. She—she gave me back my soul untarnished. Do you understand what that means? Yet you—*you*—who won what I could never win . . . you thought her——" His voice broke. Those devils within whispered again. . . .

"Go on . . . go on." . . . The muffled words held an unusual note of entreaty. Val was gazing at a picture on the opposite wall, with eyes that saw apparently something far beyond. Harry glanced up wonderingly.

"She loves you," he muttered. "She confessed it."

Val uttered a dreary little laugh. "Not the love of a woman. . . . Because we had much in common. Because her idealistic little heart must have something to lean upon, she placed me upon a pedestal and leaned on me. After . . . after I allowed the pedestal to crash, you came. . . . You won her woman's love. But Leo must try to idealize those she loves. She was prepared to put you on a pedestal and to lean on you—entirely. But you laughed at her ideals. You crushed her confidence. You expected her to thrive in a—a —cabbage-patch of materialism, when she needed flowers and sunshine—when her soul yearned for beauty. . . . And she turned to me again." He got up and walked back to the window, where he played absently with the blind-cord.

Harry never moved. But Val felt the tenseness of every sense, listening, craving, assimilating his words; and he went on slowly:

"She wrote to me. There was nothing in her letters that the whole world might not have seen. But I could read her heart like an open book in each word. I could see the lone-

liness of her spirit. I could see the gulf widening between you. I could see her pitiful attempts to bridge it. I . . . the chief thing I realized in those letters was—*her love for you.*" Again he broke off and looked at the head now buried in the man's hands. "I don't profess to any virtue. If I had not thought she loved you——" He gave a little shrug. "When this infernal divorce business cropped up, did she care for public scandal for herself? *No.* Her mind was full of you. She only feared your lack of understanding. But for that fear she would have done her best to help me to freedom. And that—*that* is why she came on Monday night. D'you understand?" He leaned both hands on the table. "Leo does not *reason.* She acts—she acts—*bravely.* If you had shown her love—faith—she would never have come. But she was frozen—terrified. And so she fled to me. She knew I needed her. She knew she could help me."

"She loves you!"

The words burst again, huskily, from the gray-faced figure in the chair. He raised his head, and met Val's gaze. "She chose you—deliberately. . . . After I had warned her——"

"No threats would make Leo desert her friends. How . . . how little you seem to know of her! She does love me . . . as a friend."

Harry had risen and walked to the empty grate.

"I realized long ago that some—force—was separating us," he said slowly, breaking through his habitual reserve with evident difficulty. "If you were not actually that force you represented, symbolized it. She—chose—you," he repeated dully. Then he glanced in a curious manner at Val. "If you had found me on Tuesday I—I think I should have killed you."

"Why haven't you?" Val's unexpected rejoinder caused Wallis to stare in astonishment.

"Leo might have understood—then. It—it's what I can't understand—your going off, just then, on business."

Harry's hand fell with a crash on the mantel-shelf.

"God! D'you think I haven't been in hell? I daren't remain among my fellow-creatures . . . I tried . . . I gave up. . . . I went to the mountains." He broke off abruptly, endeavoring to struggle back into his mask. But this clearer glimpse of the stark, quivering nakedness behind was sufficient revelation to Val. All the buoyancy which, impelled by high resolve, had carried him along to this testing-point seemed to ebb. More acutely was he conscious of the shadow over the room he had thought full of sunshine. He turned his back, and again clutched the blind-cord. A hollow vault of emptiness stretched where once a boy had thrown stones for a puppy.

"Why have you come?" Wallis asked for the second time, but in a very different tone. "You love her. Why have you not taken the chance?"

The tassel of the blind came off in Val's fingers.

"I . . . I . . . couldn't," he muttered almost inaudibly. "She was not—mine. She came to me—'I have left Harry,' was all she could say. . . . She held the little dog in her arms —'Harry's first present,' she said. She cradled it like a child—your child . . . sobbed over it. . . . Ah! Wallis!" His shaking voice broke suddenly, "Go to her. . . . Go to her. . . . I'm such a reed. . . . I can't bear——" Flinging himself in the chair by the table, he buried his head in his outflung arms.

Only the distant notes of a barrel-organ broke the silence that again fell over the room.

Wallis stood immovable. But there was no barrier of ice now hiding the spirit in his gray eyes. They were fixed upon the broken figure with a light which nobody, not even Leo, had seen in them before. It was the light of revelation.

The lens of prejudice, of suspicion, jealousy, bitterness, crashed into a thousand fragments. Like Leo he seemed all at once to breathe deep draughts of fresh pure air. The pale candle-light of reason waned, lost in the illumination of another's truth, another's faith; submerged in the flood of love that, deliberately thwarted of late, now surged over him, all its old force doubly intensified. . . .

Presently he took a step forward and laid a hand on the other man's shoulder. The touch held all the magnetic tenderness that had conquered Leo. Val felt it too—that subtle silent warmth. He raised his face with a half-laugh.

"This . . . these days. . . . Such a confounded strain . . ." he apologized jerkily.

"You have given me something very precious," Harry said; and the simple words covered more than Val read into them.

"I think"—he went on slowly—"I think I understand that—force—a little, at last. . . . You say I have won her 'woman's love.' . . . But I have not won her soul. . . . That . . . you possess the key I never found. I know now. . . . I think I have learned . . . which is the greater."

"You can win all if you will." Val's face was averted again. "All," he repeated. "All . . . if—if you can *give* all too!"

Looking up unexpectedly he caught another glimpse of the awakened soul in the man beside him. It shone openly, unabashed, illumining the usually rigid features with a glory never produced by the world of hard plain facts. . . .

With a certainty words alone could never give, Val, in that flash of revelation, knew that all would be well with Leo.

The shadow deepened, which to Harry was brilliant sunlight. Val propped his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. He could not speak. Nor could he think cohe-

rently. The taut wire had relaxed. Save for a grayish void all around, the world might have ceased. Conscious of an appalling weakness, he jerked himself free of the mists shrouding his voice and mind.

"Can I have . . . a whisky-and-soda? When . . . when is there a train?"

Harry was surprised to find his own eyes misty, and he fumbled with his pocketbook, after pressing the bell. Drawing out a little time-table, a loose sheet of paper fluttered to the table. Val, recognizing his own writing, looked up interrogatively, and took the sheet between his unsteady fingers.

"I always carry that about," Harry owned with his sublime straightforwardness. "It's Leo's."

He turned away to give the order to the waiter. Val glanced down at the words he had scribbled long, long ago:

"Rise again, ye shades of Dreamland!
Open, portals of my heart!
Songs of love in magic numbers
Cause the tears of love to start.

"Through the pine wood will I wander,
Where the mountain brooklet springs,
Where the forest stags are roaming,
Where the little song-thrush sings."

Lady Bottreux-Barlington told Leo that once, after looking into Val's eyes, she dared not look again.

Harry turned back from the door, the time-table in his hands. But words froze upon his lips. He stood for a moment, spellbound. And then all the barriers of reserve crashed suddenly—demolished by the divine force of understanding. With the impulse born of knowledge only gained through outer darkness, he strode across the room and threw an arm round the younger man's shoulders.

"My dear fellow," he muttered brokenly. And again, "My dear, dear fellow." . . .

Dusk drew at last its mantle over that interminable day. And still Leo walked . . . walked . . . walked. Once she became conscious of terrible weakness, and turned into a shop. She had a vague idea of eating something; of drinking something—something without any taste but hot—soothing. Then again, the weakness over, she walked . . . walked . . . walked.

Her mind, wrapped in its blanket of bitterness, revolved incessantly, with terrible clarity, round one point. What would be the outcome of to-day's extraordinary test? What was happening even now between Harry and Val?

As the day wore on, her overwrought nerves evoked melodramatic memories of scenes in plays, books, or in real life colored by sensational newspapers. They added fresh terror. She had faced the elemental in both these men. Knowing of its existence, she tortured herself with one horror after another. By night, anything seemed possible. She tried to sit by the fire and calm her shaking limbs. But every footfall outside sent her leaping to her feet, dreading she knew not what.

And, as her brain feared, so her soul grew tortured too.

The anchor alone capable of holding Leo swung about aimlessly in the wake of the boat. The love, thrown up thus from its deep-sea mooring, tossed her to and fro between the two shores—the two realities love alone could merge into one. . . .

Would Val return soon and claim her?

Would Harry return and carry her back to the cold vault of duty?

"Not that. . . . Never that. Val would never allow that to happen. . . ."

Harry looked "very ill." . . . Suppose he became—had become—seriously ill? Alone. Ill and alone. . . . And she with no *right* to go to him? . . . Married "rights"—how she had hated the word! But to forfeit that right. . . . After all it was a beautiful word, if spelled in letters of love. . . .

Sitting shivering before a fire on this warm spring evening, she took, figuratively, that uncertain, craving thing called a soul in both hands and faced it, at last fearlessly.

Did it demand too much? All. . . . All. . . . All. It demanded All. Only with All could it rest content.

But was the perfection of All possible—that Infinite All—in a finite world? In a universe infinite, indeed, as she had once realized, but composed of finite particles?

Her mind reverted to a night of exaltation at Willerton, exaltation produced by Val's letter. Always Val. . . . He—he *enticed,* up . . . up. . . . Always Val. . . .

That elusive anchor of love was beyond the mortal power of pilots. It found its own mooring, and that it gripped. It listened to no arguments of reason, of spirit. It was a spirit itself, though maybe hid by flesh. But flesh was one of the finite particles in the infinite Universe. . . .

When the mooring was composed of two different layers of sand, they should be held together by the anchor's hooks—not crumble away at the touch. . . .

"The least common multiple," Val had said. . . . And the least common multiple must necessarily be composed of grains from both layers of sand. Otherwise the term held no meaning. . . .

Val again. . . . Always Val. "Readjust ideals," he had said—"Readjust." . . .

Nine o'clock struck—then, hours after, ten. . . .

The more tangible horrors crowded back upon Leo, sending her forth into the quiet road, to walk again up and down, up and down. . . .

With sore swollen ankles and aching head she returned to her fire and sank upon the couch. Her glance wandered to the little piano where Val had played and sung last night. Closing her tired eyes, she listened in fancy to the soft notes of his voice. And some of the lavender fragrance in which she had bathed then wafted again, soothingly, round her tortured spirit. . . .

The clock struck eleven. Evidently no news would reach her to-night. What could have happened?

Feeling the flood of fear again rising, she switched up the light and turned into her bedroom. Though sleep would be impossible, bed would bring a certain rest.

And just when Leo had slipped off her frock, a taxi whirred round the corner and stopped at the front door.

Her own heart, she thought, had stopped too. Then it went on again at a terrific pace, with big choking thumps. She heard Mrs. Marten's hurried tread, her voice on the door-step.

Flinging on a negligée, she opened the folding-door into her sitting-room. But further action seemed impossible. She leaned back weakly against the woodwork, wondering dully if she were about to faint. Through a roaring sound in her ears, she heard the murmur of voices. . . . Would they never cease? . . .

Mink unexpectedly rushed out from the bedroom, darted to the door into the passage and scratched wildly.

The unformulated fears surged up in a tide. Had something terrible really happened? Was this a messenger with awful tidings? Val always bounded into a room. . . .

And then at last the door from the passage opened, and closed again. Leo's hands clutched her wraps spasmodically to her breast.

Amid the din of Mink's welcome, speech would have been useless. But words seemed impossible—and strangely un-

necessary. Her yearning, unsatisfied spirit, bursting all obstacles, had leaped forward in greeting to another long searched for but never found till now—to one it recognized in a flash—to one it hailed for mate—to one which responded—which held it, bound it, irrevocably to itself. . . . And the two figures stood motionless, separated by the room's length, their white faces and longing eyes illumined each for each by the dancing flames of firelight. . . .

The glow Leo had never seen there irradiated Harry's face when he moved toward her. She felt his hands close over her own clasped upon her breast. She felt hers relax, flutter into his. . . .

Without a word of explanation, without a word of protest, without a shadow of uncertainty—only conscious of the wondrous peace of understanding, they merged into each other's arms and clung there. . .

CHAPTER XIV

"AND you went to the mountains?"

Leo raised herself a little, where she lay on the hearth-rug. She lifted her head from the knees upon which it was pillowed, and looked curiously into his face. The firelight flickered fitfully over both their forms, enhancing the dark shadows beyond.

"I went to the mountains . . . yes. I felt afraid, Leo—terribly afraid. Of . . . of myself." . . . He leaned back so that his face lay in shadow. "When I was a little fellow and my mother died, I was sent to an old aunt in a cottage among the Welsh hills. They . . . they soothed—they and the sea. . . . And now they—they seemed to *call*. . . . Something in them called. What's that?"

"'The Lordly Ones, in the hollow hills,'" she murmured, in louder tones. "Something—Val sings." . . .

At the name, Harry leaned forward and suddenly drew her head close to his breast—the instinctive movement of possession.

"Leo," he said earnestly, "Val belongs to us both now. Doesn't he? Give him all you can. . . . All. But don't ever shut me out."

She clung to him convulsively. "Never," she whispered passionately. "Never. . . . Always *one* now. . . . Both one."

"Where is Val?" she asked, after a long silence; and the man understood the yearning note in her voice—a note which found echo in his own full heart.

"He wouldn't come back with me—said he must be alone. I think he meant to catch the night train."

"I hope . . . he is sometimes rather rash." A little fear lurked behind the words.

In silence again both watched the dancing flames.

Presently Harry sat upright. "Do you remember my telling you about the South Africa Branch? Shall we go out there together, and build it up—work it up together?"

"Together?" She sat back, her eyes shining. "Build—just you and I? Make our own home? Not magnificence. . . . Just a little nest. . . . And some time——" Breaking off, she twined her arms round his neck, whispering the last sentences in his ear. "I see some things—from your point of view now. I want . . . I want——"

His lips on hers answered her unspoken wish. Then he rose, lifting her bodily into his arms.

"It's time you were in bed, my darling. . . . These shadows"—he kissed each eye in turn. "*I* want——" a leaping tongue of firelight illumined his smile—"I want just my own, own Leonore to laugh at me and cry, 'Oh, Harry! Isn't it—*glorious!*'"

The crowd which can always collect, even before daybreak, melted away. The two motor-cars had been extricated from their embrace, neither very much damaged. One driver had given his name and all details. The other, half drunk, had been taken away. Merely a common every-day fact—a street accident. Neither of the drivers hurt. An ambulance had quickly arrived to remove the other figure—the figure now prostrate that had been, only a few moments before, upright and full of life—crossing the street. . . .

"Wonder if 'e was drunk?"—the natural supposition in a world of hard plain fact.

"Dunno. Looked loike it—seemed mazed-loike."

In the Accident Ward, other questions passed from Sister to doctor, to nurse—

"His face is familiar," murmured the Sister.

"Very—beautiful," said the nurse—but not aloud.

No card or name could be found to identify this case—only an unposted letter addressed to: "Mrs. Wallis, 12 Elizabeth Road, Kensington."

"Send . . . at once," the doctor ordered briefly.

The rising sun quivered a few faint beams through a window over the small bed round which a screen had been placed. Leo halted in the doorway, leaning heavily on the arm propelling her forward.

Mists suddenly swam before her eyes, and every limb shook violently.

A nurse hurried forward and spoke a few words to Harry—words which Leo hardly caught. Something about "no hope. . . . Back broken. . . . Just regained consciousness. . . ." Then she led them round the screen.

And at once all fear and horror fled from Leo. There was no fear of *anything* in the dark Irish-blue eyes raised to her own. They only looked strangely remote . . . strangely aloof . . . strangely wistful. . . . As she fell on her knees beside the bed, they seemed to pass beyond her—to rest for one moment on the man at her side—then to return, with a tired softness, to her face.

She bent close to the brow whose ethereality was so wonderfully enhanced, and touched gently the dark clustering hair. It felt rather damp. Those beautiful lips that would never sing to her again moved faintly—framed three words which she alone could hear—only her heart understand. She closed them with her own reverently . . . lingeringly. . . .

Harry's arms folding about her presently drew her up

—away from the still bed. He almost carried her from the ward. The screen was drawn closer. And a hand pulled a curtain, shutting out the life-giving rays of the sun. . . .

From the window of a little room adjoining, Leo looked dazedly over the roofs of houses stretching away—mile upon mile. Smoke rose from many chimneys. It went up and up, merging into clouds which soared. . . . Clouds of white and clouds of darkness. . . . Clouds irradiated by the sun's rays. *Jazz clouds.* . . .

Holding close the arms around her, she raised her head . . . seemed, to Harry, to be listening. . . .

Among the hum of early traffic and the twittering of birds, did exultant laughter rise? Laughter and song? . . . triumphant shouts . . . the clash and glitter of waving lances? . . . The welcome of the Unseen Hosts to one who had longed for Freedom.

THE END